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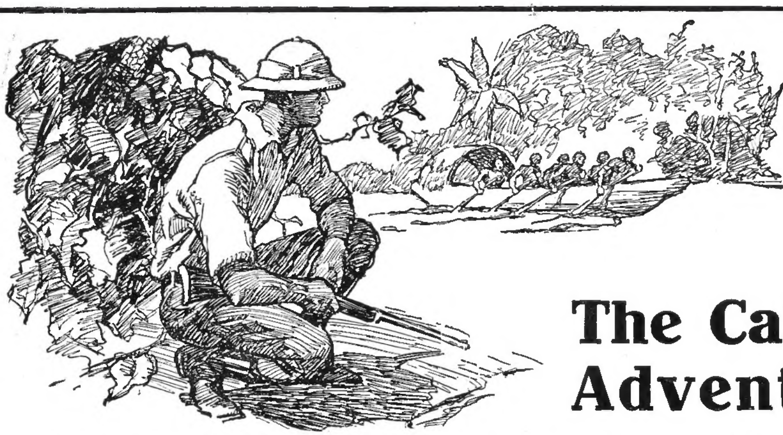
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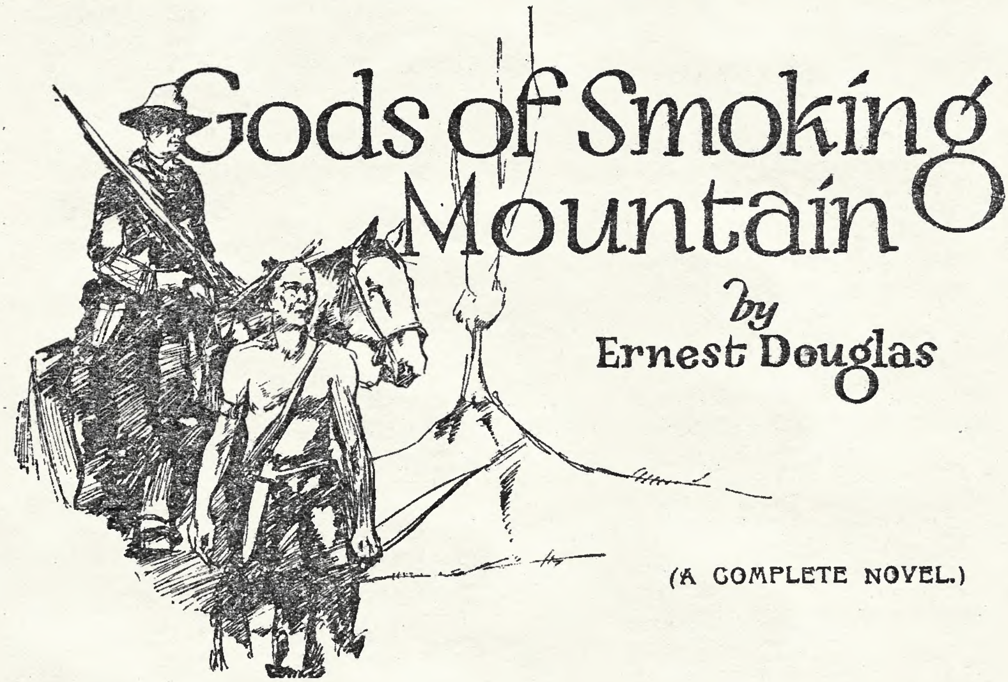
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CHAPTER I.

VOLCANO'S BREATH.

ALTHOUGH he was convinced that he must die before morning, Louis Parnell had to laugh. True, it was not much of a laugh; his tortured lungs had little air to spare for vocal merriment.

"I came down here on the off side of nowhere to prospect," he was thinking ruefully. "And for what? Nothing much, except sunshine and heat to heal these leaky bellows of mine. And what did I run into right off the bat? More poison gas! Just what I'd had a lot too much of in France."

His glazing eyes turned westward up the slope of Smoking Mountain, the truncated peak that was down on Mexican maps as *El Monte de la Espuma.* Against the starlit sky was a faint reddish glow, the reflection from smoldering fires in the crater.

"Smokin' Mountain has been still for three or four years now," the Indian trader in Quitovaquita had told him. "'Bout time for her to begin actin' up again, though; and when she does act up, she acts."

Parnell fancied that he could still smell the overpowering saffron vapor that had suddenly spouted from a fumarole almost at his feet. What a fool he had been to go exploring around the

base of a semiquiescent volcano in twilight! But the day's journey from the last water hole had been brief; he and his burro had arrived fresh at this tiny spring which he planned to make his base for a leisurely examination of the country and possibly for a climb to the crater.

He had thought to walk a little way upward over a waste of twisted black lava that reminded him of a frozen ebon sea, and perhaps spy out the most feasible route for the ascent.

How long he lay unconscious, overcome by that noxious fog, he could not tell. He knew only that he had at last recovered his senses and rolled, scrambled, slid down the mountainside. After an age of agony he had dragged himself to his blankets, already spread out here beneath a scraggly paloverde tree.

His burro, Jenny, contentedly munched at a near-by brittle bush. Far off over the brooding, cactus-sentineled desert that stretched to the southward, a lone coyote howled in dismal imitation of a whole pack. When the coyote began its rounds to-morrow night it would find a good meal waiting here beside the spring. No; by that time the keen-eyed scavengers of the skies would have left nothing but clean-picked bones.

The possibility of human aid he dismissed as negligible. Quitovaquita, on the Arizona border, was a hundred miles to the north. Altar, in the middle of the desert of the same name, lay almost as far to the northeast.

Somewhere around west of Smoking Mountain, or so he had heard, lived a remnant of an Indian tribe called the Areneños. There was not one chance in a million that one of the Indians, or a wandering prospector, would come his way to-night.

"And who will care?" he reflected bitterly. "Nobody will even miss me except the creditors of the Stockmen's State Bank, and they'll just be confirmed in their opinion that I was throwing a big bluff with no intention of ever coming back."

His morbid meditation ended in a heavy stupor. When he again struggled back to consciousness, voices were ringing in his ears. Delirium, he decided as he opened his eyes and looked into the face of the full moon, across which floated a wisp of volcanic cloud.

Only a few yards away there were half dozen saddled horses standing with lowered heads. Several human figures clustered about the edge of the *tinaja,* or natural rock tank, below the spring.

"It is only a gringo, I tell you. I have no time to waste on such!"

The words were harsh and impatient, spoken in Spanish by some one evidently accustomed to command.

"But, papa, he is very sick. He will die."

Parnell was too torpid, mentally and physically, to feel any surprise at hearing a woman's voice.

"What if he does? It is better so, for then he can cause us no trouble. I really ought to slit his throat to make sure. Are the mules all watered, Bernardo?"

"They have all drunk, Don Firmin."

"Then let us be going. It is great luck that the spring is not dry, for now we will not have to turn off to Hotunikat. Another day will see us in *El Castillo de los Montaños,* where we can laugh at those meddlesome rurales. Come on, Tula; forget about your gringo."

A train of laden mules, twelve or fifteen of them, filed past. Horsemen dashed here and there, shouting lurid oaths and swishing reatas through the air to start the reluctant animals away from the water hole.

One of the horses, the last, halted by Parnell's bed. The rider dismounted and bent over him. It must be the woman, he felt, through she wore trousers and her features were hidden in the shadow of a spreading sombrero.

Water splashed into his face from a gurgling canteen. His hands were hurriedly but tenderly bathed, his feverish cheeks sponged with a damp handkerchief. Slim, cool fingers, pulsing with life, grasped his own inert digits.

One of the other horses came galloping back. Its hoofs sent a shower of gravel over the prostrate man.

"Tula!"

"I am coming, papa. I think that the *volcan* has breathed upon him. Old José's gods must be angry."

"It serves him right. Mexico is not for gringos."

The horses clattered away. Parnell stared bitterly into the gloom.

"Nice, charitable old party, that," he muttered.

Again darkness blotted out his senses. He lay upon his back, panting.

CHAPTER II.

TULA MAKES A RESCUE.

THE moon rode high in the western sky when Parnell was aroused by some one slipping an arm under his shoulders and raising him to a sitting position.

"Wake up, *amigo mio*."

It was the low, pleasantly modulated voice of the woman, or girl, who had pleaded for him with her father. The tones were vibrant with pity. She knelt and held him steady.

"How do you feel now?"

He was too dazed and ill to make reply. Suddenly she asked:

"Habla Vd. español?"

"Si," he whispered. "But I am very weak."

"You are better, are you not?"

"I think so. The effect of the gas has worn off a little."

"Ah! I thought it was the volcano. It is a miracle that you live. We must get you to José at once."

"José? Who is he?"

"The medicine man of the Areneños. He has remedies of his own for those who have breathed the mountain's fumes. But Hotunikat is nine leagues away and there is little time. Still, Chapo is big and strong. Can you ride?"

"I'll try," he promised, clenching his teeth.

She helped him to arise and caught him as he reeled drunkenly. His vision cleared gradually and he saw that she was almost a head shorter than himself, although a high-crowned hat trimmed with glinting silver coins had the apparent effect of bringing her almost to his stalwart height.

Her dress was a buckskin jacket and black velvet *charro* trousers slashed from instep to knee. At her slender waist was a pearl-handled revolver in a beaded holster. His weakness and the imperfect light prevented his getting a full view of her face.

A call of "Chapo!" brought a large gray horse ambling toward them. Parnell caught hold of a stirrup. His enfeebled muscles bunched for one supreme effort and he scrambled into the saddle.

"Bravo, señor! Now wait until I fill this canteen. Better take your revolver, too. The rest of your outfit we must abandon, I fear."

From the saddle horn she hung the dripping canteen. Then she vaulted up behind him, light as a humming-bird's feather. With one hand she supported him, with the other she twitched the reins and sent the horse cantering along an almost imperceptible trail that led northwest. Jenny, watching from the shadow of a mesquite tree, brayed a puzzled farewell.

Though the way was very rough, surmounting lofty ridges and then dipping down into deep canyons, Parnell at first withstood the ordeal surprisingly well. Whether he could survive nearly thirty miles of such transportation, he did not know; but for the present he was progressing famously. Every step that the

horse took set red-hot needles shooting through his lungs.

"What is your name?" he asked after a time.

"Tula," she replied softly.

"Tula? Have you no other name?"

"None," she denied hesitantly. "Just Tula."

He puzzled over this until he remembered the remark of her father about the rurales. Evidently he was not on good terms with those arms of Mexican law. Doubtless she did not consider it prudent to confide her full name to an utter stranger.

Daylight found them moving across a wide valley carpeted with thousands of purple-and-yellow flowers. The horse was beginning to tire, but Tula urged him on. Continually she looked back apprehensively.

"Do you fear something?" he asked.

"My father. And also Bernardo Salgun. I slipped away from them in a dark ravine, but they will follow my tracks as soon as they miss me. And if they overtake us they will not let me take you on to Hotunikat; they will ride around us and cut us off."

"You are very foolish to brave their wrath in order to help me. I have no claim upon you."

"Any one who is ill and helpless has a claim upon those who are more fortunate. That is a point upon which my father and I have differed before. He is a good man and he dearly loves me, his only child; but he is without mercy for his enemies or any one who stands in his path."

Parnell's strength began to fail. His limbs were like lead. He knew that he was on the point of collapse, but clung to the saddle with grim determination. Her arms, slim and marvelously strong, went around him and he was too far gone to protest.

"Let's stop," he proposed hoarsely.

"What? Can you go no farther?"

"I can go farther—yes. But no woman can stand the strain that you are under. Let us rest under that cliff."

"You forget that my father and Bernardo are almost surely following us. Unless you get to Hotunikat before they overtake us, you die. What do you think of Chapo? Is he not a noble animal?"

Eventually they left the foothills and came out upon a level *llano* studded with cacti and other desert growths, then with gray sagebrush and scrubby mesquite. The *llano* sloped down to a sea of billowing sand, the dreaded *médanos,* or dunes, that stretched clear to the Gulf of California.

At several points it was intersected by small arroyos. On the near bank of one arroyo were perhaps half a hundred dome-shaped huts of brush that had been plastered with white-brown clay. Most of them were falling into decay; less than ten seemed to be in even a fair state of repair.

Before one of the latter Tula pulled Chapo to a halt. Her face was as white as that of the unconscious man in the saddle before her. Numb and aching arms refused further obedience to her will. Before she could call for assistance, Parnell slipped from her grasp and sprawled upon the soft sand.

A shriveled old Indian with matted iron-gray hair, clad in a dirty rag of a shirt, tottered out of a wikiup. His sunken black eyes regarded the new arrivals somberly, inquiringly.

"A white man!" he shrilled. "Does he bring a bronze god?"

"A bronze god? What nonsense are you talking, José? He is only a poor traveler who has breathed the smoke of El Monte."

"Then the spirits of the underworld are angry at him. Take him away. He is accursed."

"Listen, José. If a stranger wanders upon your sacred mountain and is poisoned by its fumes, is that his fault? This young man will perish unless you save him. He needs tender nursing,

the medicines that no one but you knows. And I can stay only a little time."

"Take him away. The spirits do not breathe upon those who have not offended them."

José's tirade was cut short by a grave, dignified, powerfully-muscled young man of perhaps thirty years who had approached silently from another hut. He spoke swiftly and emphatically in the guttural Areneño tongue as he looked down at the inert Parnell.

"Thank you, Pablo. I knew that you would not refuse me. And you can make your uncle see reason, I'm sure. Now let us move the Americano. No, not into a lodge, but under yonder *jacal* where he can have plenty of air."

Between them they managed to drag the still unconscious Yankee beneath an open brush shed. José, obedient to Pablo's sharp orders, shuffled away to get his remedies. Tula keeled over in a dead faint.

CHAPTER III.

FOILING A MURDERER.

A SHAKY hand pushed down on Lou Parnell's unshaven chin. Between his teeth was poured a bitter liquid from a bowl of brick-red earthenware. He coughed and sputtered, but swallowed.

His eyelids fluttered open. The tired gray horse stood panting. Tula was sitting up and regarding him anxiously through black eyes that still flashed with unconquerable fire and spirit despite infinite weariness. Evidently she was not aware that he was conscious.

It was the first time that he had got a good view of her face and with keen interest he noted the details of her striking appearance. The thin nose was just a least bit hooked; the cheek bones were high and the jaw muscles a trifle prominent. Not a beautiful face by Anglo-Saxon standards, but one rendered marvelously attractive by satiny skin and a complexion of rich olive that glowed with abounding health.

Her head went up like that of some desert hawk at the muffled sound of horses galloping in sand. There was a trace of terror in her aspect as she glanced again at Lou. She looked about as though seeking a place to hide him, then seemed to decide that she must stand her ground.

Two horsemen, spurs a-jangle, drew up beside the *jacal*. One was young, probably not more than twenty-six or seven, tall, well knit, very dark. Around his waist was a broad leather girdle bossed with polished silver ornaments. His lips were now curled in a cruel and cynical smile.

The other was older, somewhat heavy of face and squat of body. Across his upper lip straggled a mustache of widely spaced, short black hairs.

"So this is where we find you, my shameless daughter," barked the elder. "You stole away from us in the night, went back to that dog of a gringo and brought him here to your treacherous Areneño friends. Most unmaidenly conduct, especially for one whose hand is already pledged in marriage. Bernardo is of a very forgiving nature if he overlooks this."

"I am ready to go with you now, papa," she answered submissively. "I could not leave him there in the desert to die."

"What is a gringo more or less? And he is probably a spy. Such as he have no business in the Smoking Mountain country."

"I have told him nothing. He knows nothing."

"Well, it will not do to run any risks. A bullet through the heart and then we are sure that he will not trouble us."

"No! No! Father, I beg of you to spare him. He is only a poor, unlucky traveler who has done no harm."

"And he shall do no harm. Stand aside."

"You shall not!" she screamed, throwing herself forward and reaching fran-

tically for the revolver that he held in his hand.

"One would think that you love this gringo instead of me," sneered Salgun.

Like a flash she drew her own weapon and pointed it straight at her father's breast. He looked down at her and laughed.

"You can't," he defied. "You know you can't."

Slowly her arm sank. "I can't shoot you, papa," she confessed. "But I pray you will not be so cruel as to murder this defenseless young man."

He reached down and twitched the gun from her unresisting fingers.

"You shoot the coyote, Bernardo," he directed. "The claws of our lioness are now clipped."

Salgun reached for the rifle stock that projected from a saddle scabbard under his left leg.

"Hands up!"

The words clicked from the throat of Lou Parnell, who had rolled over, seized his own revolver and pointed it straight at the Mexicans. The ugly muzzle waved menacingly from one to the other of them.

Three pairs of eyes gazed at him in astonishment. A smile of relief overspread the agonized countenance of the girl.

"You two hombres have just one minute to start making tracks.

"Señorita Tula, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me. I only hope that some day I may be able to repay the debt in some slight measure. You are at liberty to go with them or to remain here under such protection as I am able to give you."

"I shall go with them, of course. I cannot do otherwise. This man is my father and the other is—my betrothed. What I did was only my Christian duty.

"Adios, señor. May you soon recover. José and Pablo, take good care of him. Adios!"

She swung upon the gray. Hissing curses, the two outlaws turned their horses toward the hills in the south. Not once did she look back.

Parnell fainted.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SAND PEOPLE.

TWO weeks passed before Parnell stirred away from the *jacal*. The volcanic gas poisoning affected him strangely. His lungs were so sore that it was torture to breathe, yet he suffered no hemorrhages. His flesh wasted away until little was left save a grizzly skeleton with a covering of tightly drawn yellow parchment.

Obediently he swallowed José's nauseous drafts; not that he believed they were doing him any good but half because he was sure that the crabbed medicine man would rather have his patient refuse his grudging ministrations. More than once he heard José and Pablo in argument. Pablo was evidently his friend; José was suspicious.

Parnell's lung tissues, burned first in France by mustard gas and again seared by choking vapor from the fumarole around on the far side of Smoking Mountain, were simply not capable of absorbing enough oxygen to supply his body's needs. He suspected that his blood had also been charged with some subtle toxin.

The prediction of the army doctors that a desert camping trip would retard instead of hasten his recovery had been borne out in a manner that they could scarcely have foreseen. Lou was ready to admit now that he had been a bullheaded idiot in disregarding their advice. But his desperate impatience to get into physical condition to carry out a certain promise would not allow him to remain passive in a hospital.

Pablo made a journey to the spring to bring in Lou's burro and outfit. With his own bedding the sick man could be a little more comfortable. He shook off

some of his lethargy and began to get acquainted with the kindly, simple people upon whose mercy he had been thrown by fate and Tula.

There was Juana, Pablo's handsome if heavy-featured wife, forever busy at her manifold duties. They had one child, a grave little elf of a boy some four years old. And there were Juana's twin sisters, Rita and Chona, shy girls of eighteen or so and rather too plump to share her stately grace. They grinned and showed very white, even teeth when Lou finally gained enough strength and Indian words to joke them feebly.

These were the Areneños, or sand people. In limping Spanish picked up while trading at Quitovaquita and Altar, Pablo told Parnell that the tribe had been decimated by a plague some years before. All the other survivors had moved away to join their cousins, the Papagos, up in Arizona.

Why this handful remained was not clear. But Lou suspected that it had something to do with their worship of supernatural beings who were supposed to animate the Smoking Mountain.

One day, when Parnell had begun to feel more than casual interest in the queer food the Indians fed him, José amazed him by asking in labored but perfectly plain English:

"Did you ever see a gringo with a bronze god?"

"What? A gringo with a bronze god? I don't understand, my friend."

The medicine man's beady eyes, sunk deep in a face that was all folds and wrinkles, seemed to gleam with a demonish light.

"Then why did you come to the Smoking Mountain?"

"Why, I was sick. I just came down this way to rest and get well. I thought that I might prospect for gold.

"But tell me, José, where did you learn English? Have you lived among my people?"

The Areneño did not reply at once. He was staring intently toward the summit of the volcano, above its scarred sides that shone red and purple and cobalt in the rays of the dying sun. The cloud floating from the crater's throat was thicker and blacker than usual. It looked dangerous.

"It has been a long time," José mumbled finally. "I had a friend once. He was a white man. Are you sure that you have seen no one with a bronze god?"

"Quite sure."

Shaking his shaggy head, José hobbled away. Soon he lugged out of the medicine lodge an ancient drum made of deerskin stretched over a section of hollow log. Upon this he thumped with a wooden club, producing a resonant roll, and at the same time raised a chant that sounded like an invocation to savage deities.

Pablo was incredulous when Parnell asked him how his uncle came to know English.

"I did not know that he could speak a word of that tongue. But when I was a boy José disappeared for a long time. We thought that a shark had got him when he was fishing at the seashore. When he came back he said that he had been carried away on a ship, and told such strange stories of what he had seen that no one would believe him. Perhaps it was an American ship."

"And what about this bronze god he speaks of?"

"He never mentioned that until after he grew old and childish. I think his head is getting foolish. He will not tell me what he means."

Parnell, on thinking the matter over, decided that while José's mental faculties might be dulled by age, there was something more than mere hallucination back of his persistent querying about a bronze god. Was this a mystery to be solved? The white man hoped so. It provided something to occupy his mind and crowd out personal problems that, for the present at least, were much better forgotten.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

WHEN Parnell did begin to mend he improved rapidly. He devoured enormous quantities of dried mountain sheep meat, stewed and boiled, and developed a prodigious appetite for *camotes*—starchy roots which grew in the sand of the *médanos.* These, with mesquite beans and cactus fruit, were the staple foods of the Indians.

One day he was strong enough to bathe and shave himself, and the next he washed his clothes in water that Chona and Rita brought for him in large terra cotta *ollas* borne atop of their heads. Soon he would be able to move on.

Yet he was reluctant to leave Hotunikat and his new friends. Grim and desertlike as were the surroundings, he did not find them oppressive. For the first time since entering an officers' training camp in 1917, he was at peace.

The war and that other trouble which he had left behind him seemed very far away, almost inconsequential, there in the shadow of those majestic mountains that rimmed the horizon on the north and east.

This place, he reasoned, would serve as well as any as a base for his vaguely projected prospecting excursions. And here, some day, he might meet the girl who had rescued him at her own peril from a lonely, lingering death.

He wanted to thank her again. In view of her father's enmity, however, he could not well seek her out without running the risk of bringing fresh woes upon her head. Was she married by this time to that young man called Bernardo? Parnell was puzzled to find how much the possibility disturbed him.

Pablo could tell him little or nothing about her. He did not even know her father's name but declared that the Mexican was "a very bad man." The Areneños lived in more or less fear of him.

Once he had offered to buy the one horse owned by the Indians, a clean-limbed little sorrel mare called Rosita, but Pablo had refused to sell at any price. Furious at this rebuff, he had sworn that he was going to take her anyway. It was only Tula's pleading that turned him from his purpose. She had called several times at the village, later, and left small gifts that the Indians prized highly.

It had been less than a year since the Mexicans first appeared in the Smoking Mountain region and took up their residence in some caverns at the base of the volcano, three or four miles to the southeast. Pablo stayed as far away from the place as possible, but it was his impression that they did not spend much more than half their time there. Frequently he had seen them going or returning through the mountain passes, and at least once with a party of prisoners.

"A bandit band," was Parnell's unspoken conclusion. They had a retreat here in these inaccessible ranges and made forays out to prey on victims. Tula was a robber chieftain's daughter. In view of what Pablo told him, and of what he had overhead while he lay sick at the spring, he could not doubt it.

In another week Lou was at least as strong as he had been when he left Quitovaquita. He began to make trips out into the dunes to help the Areneños gather *camotes,* and he promised Pablo that he would soon slay many deer and sheep with his carbine. Then he fell into the habit of spending much of his time weeding and hoeing in a little garden half a mile or so up the arroyo.

There the Indians irrigated corn and beans and melons with the water from a small spring that was already on the point of drying up at the beginning of summer. Here he earned their boundless gratitude by digging into a bluff, pounding a hole through a thin limestone ledge, and renewing the flow.

One day, as he worked alone pinching some strange bugs off the pumpkin vines, he was startled by a hail from beyond the brush fence that was supposed to bar desert animals from the garden. He turned to see Tula on Chapo. She was regarding him with a smile but with furtiveness in her manner. He wiped his dirty hand on a bush and reached across the fence to take hers.

"Ah, *mi amigo!* You do not look like a sick man any more. Why, you are well and handsome now."

"I have almost forgotten that I ever was sick," he laughed. "My lungs, I suppose, are not entirely healed; but they give me little cause for worry now. How about yourself?"

"As usual," she replied, nervously running her fingers through Chapo's mane and looking toward the crest of the bluff as though expecting pursuit.

She seemed a little thinner than when he remembered her. Her eyes were slightly hollow and their dancing brightness beclouded. And yet, strangely pretty. Yes, Lou decided, Tula was a girl who would be noticed anywhere.

"I am more than glad to see you again. I want to tell you once more how grateful I am to you for bringing me in. Under the circumstances, it was nothing less than heroic. And a whole lot more trouble than I'm worth, I'm afraid. Your father—I hope he——"

"Oh!" She shrugged her shoulders. "He got over it, I think. But Bernardo is still pouting."

"I am sorry if I was the cause of a misunderstanding between sweethearts."

"Don't be sorry, for I am not."

Her demeanor perplexed him. She seemed to want to talk, yet fear or embarrassment kept her silent. While he groped for words she asked:

"Do you know who I am, señor?"

"Why, no. You did not tell me, and the Areneños do not know."

"My father's name is Firmin Alvarado. Does that mean anything to you? Is it not familiar?"

"Alvarado? Let me see. Wasn't there a general of that name involved in the Maytorena rebellion several years ago? And after a defeat at Hermosillo he——"

"Turned bandit. Yes, that was my father." She spoke swiftly, defiantly. "He is the one who captured half a dozen Sonora State officials and held them prisoner for more than a month. He kept them right down there at the Castle of the Mountains—where we are now living. And when they agreed to certain reforms that he demanded, he released them. They did not keep their pledge. Now people call him an outlaw.

"He is no ordinary *bandido,* señor. He takes only from the rich and powerful who are oppressing our country, and gives his booty to the poor or stores it against the day when the people will call him to lead them."

"Then he is a patriot, not a bandit. You will pardon me, señorita, but it would seem to be a dangerous business for a woman. I cannot understand why he allows you to—to——"

"Why he keeps me with him? It is against his will, but my place is at his side. I promised my mother on her deathbed that I would never leave him, and I have been with him ever since I left the convent six months ago.

"Now he wants me to marry Bernardo Salgun, who is indeed a bandit and only pretends to be a patriot. He wants me to—— But a thousand pardons. I must not annoy you by chattering about my little cares."

"On the contrary, I owe you my life and am yours to command. If you are in trouble you must——"

"No! No! I must tell you why I stole away from my father and Bernardo and came to see you to-day. We leave to-morrow on a short journey and I may have the opportunity to mail a letter

for you. You may wish to send word to some one that you are safe. Your wife, perhaps."

"I thank you, but there is no one."

She flashed one of her rare smiles. "No sweetheart?"

"No sweetheart. There is a reason why I can ask no woman to have a place in my life. Not for a long time, probably never."

"Ah, yes; your sickness."

"No, I am going to recover from that. Nor am I a fugitive from justice. It is something that I can't explain."

Two horsemen emerged from a clump of desert willows a quarter of a mile up the arroyo.

"There they are!" she cried. "Adios, señor. But take my advice and never go unarmed in the Smoking Mountain country. Always carry a revolver at least."

She clapped little silver spurs to Chapo's sides and galloped away. The Mexicans reined in until she joined them; after a short parley the party angled southward.

"Now, why did she really come?" Parnell wondered. "Was it just to offer to mail a letter or to find out what woman I would write to, if any? Anyway, I'm glad she came."

CHAPTER VI.

A BRONZE GOD APPEARS.

THE Areneños wore no footgear save rude sandals to protect the soles of their feet from thorns and cactus spines. Their favorite sandal material was sea-lion hide, and as the supply was now running low, Pablo proposed that he and Parnell make a trip to the beach.

He knew of a rocky point where the lions crawled out to sun themselves, and with the rifle they ought to be able to shoot all they needed in a few minutes.

Parnell had long wanted to visit the gulf, which he often saw shining across the dunes on clear days, and he agreed eagerly. When José heard of the project he vetoed it emphatically. He harangued his nephew at length, waving his skinny old arms toward Smoking Mountain.

"He says that the omens are unfavorable and we must wait," the younger man explained, with a sheepish grin. "José has been reading the signs in the smoke."

Three days later, however, the medicine man said that the gods of the volcano were willing for the journey to be undertaken. At the same time he announced that he was going, too.

This did not please Pablo at all, but as usual he bowed to the will of his aged kinsman. So they bundled him on Rosita, filled Lou's two-gallon's canteen, and set off.

It was a sparkling morning, cooled by a sea breeze, and Parnell looked forward to an easy, pleasant trip. But he had underestimated the difficulties of travel in the *médanos*. At every step his foot sank an inch into the yielding white sand. He was soon tired, but discovered with elation that he again possessed a reserve of physical vigor upon which to draw. He breathing was easy and regular. Yes, he was well.

The breeze failed and a merciless sun drew the moisture out of his tissues. When they finally reached the head of a narrow inlet, along toward sundown, their water supply was practically exhausted.

Here was no sign of fresh water that Lou could see. Pablo, however, began to scoop a hole in the wet sand under a bank. Water slowly seeped in and Pablo motioned the white man to drink. It was brackish and warm, but gloriously wet. All three of them turned to and made a larger hole for the panting, sweat-caked mare.

They spent the night there, eating nothing except a little jerked mutton, and feeding Rosita from a bag of mesquite beans that they had brought along.

Although Parnell was dog-tired he could not sleep for a long time. The ceaseless roar of the breakers, the dreariness of that unpeopled shore, depressed his spirits.

At daylight they had breakfast, then Parnell shouldered his carbine and they visited a stony promontory at the mouth of the inlet. Sea lions had left plenty of traces there, but none were in sight. It looked as though they had a wait of indefinite length ahead of them. Lou, on seeing a shark leap from the surf, regretted that they had no fishing tackle. Pablo suggested that they build a pen of boulders at the water's edge which would imprison fish when the tide went out.

While they were searching for some spot where plenty of boulders lay close to hand, José let out a grunt and pointed to sea. A small vessel was standing in to shore. They heard the distant rattle of anchor chains.

"A ship," said Parnell indifferently. "Are they launching a boat? I can't think what they want unless it's water, and this is a poor place to find that. There is nothing here."

"They may be bringing the bronze god," remarked José, moving about excitedly.

Parnell and Pablo smiled. With no great curiosity they watched the boat head for the inlet. In it were four men, two of whom rowed while the others scanned the landscape through binoculars.

The boat grounded on the shingle. The oarsmen remained in their seats while the others, both armed with revolvers, slowly and warily approached the observers who sat some fifty yards back from the water.

One was a tall, slim, pimply faced youth of perhaps twenty-two or three, with a petulant curl to his singularly long upper lips. The other was older, nearly as tall but a little heavier of build, very red of countenance save for a sickly white scar diagonally across the bridge of his slightly flattened nose. Certainly not a prepossessing pair.

"I do not think they have the bronze god," José declared.

"Hello!" greeted the younger. "We're looking for a tribe of Indians supposed to live somewhere near that volcano. The Areneños."

"You've landed at the right place," Lou responded. "These men are Areneños."

"What luck! Say, maybe you can tell us if one of them—pretty old, he must be—is named José."

"This is the tribal medicine man and his name is José."

"You don't say? Green," he exulted, turning to his companion, "I guess you'll have to admit now that there's something to the story."

"So far, so good," Green assented. "Say, bo, would you and your buddy mind steppin' off a piece and lettin' us have a private confab with the old duck?"

"Have you brought a bronze god?" José interjected.

The strangers stared agape. "You bet we have!" the youth exclaimed delightedly.

"Show it to 'im, Hendricks," directed Green.

From the sagging pocket of his khaki jacket Hendricks produced a paper-covered package. He nervously tore off the wrappings and disclosed a squat idol of dull metal, obviously Oriental. Parnell was not up on such things but guessed that it was a Buddha.

"That is it!" cried José, taking the idol in his fluttering hand. "Just like the one in my lodge at Hotunikat."

He pressed somewhere on the back and lifted off the head. Inside was a hollow space, empty.

"Where is Captain Frayne?" asked the medicine man as he looked up from the idol.

"Captain Frayne is dead," Hendricks

replied. "I am his nephew and I have come for the—the stuff. Is it safe?"

José nodded understandingly and murmured: "It is safe. José has been true to his trust. But you were a long time coming. And I am sorry to hear that Captain Frayne is dead. He was my good friend."

"Where is the—the box he left with you?"

"Over there," José stated vaguely, waving toward the hills.

"Gosh! Have we got to cross that sand?" expostulated Green.

"No other way, I'm afraid," Parnell told him.

"Got to make the best of it," Hendricks encouraged. "We're after something worth while, remember. Can we make it to-day, pal?"

"If you start soon. You'll have to travel light, though, and take along plenty of water."

"We'll go right back to the ship and bring a kegful. Won't take us more than fifteen minutes. So long."

Green and Hendricks made for the boat. Parnell looked dubiously at the Indians.

"Of course it's none of my business, José, but I wouldn't trust those fellows too far. They look to me like a couple of bad hombres."

"They have brought the bronze god of Captain Frayne."

"Oh, well——"

The sand quivered faintly under their feet, just enough to make them stagger. A distant rumble boomed through the stillness.

Parnell turned toward Smoking Mountain. The cloud above its crest was now thick and black, not thin and tenuous.

Pablo ran to Rosita, for the mare was pawing in fear and threatening to break the rope by which she was hitched.

José dropped to his knees, then fell face downward in abasement before his volcanic gods.

CHAPTER VII.

ACROSS THE SANDS.

WHEN Green and Hendricks came ashore the second time they were roaring the chorus of a bawdy song. Parnell suspected immediately that they had been celebrating their good fortune alcoholically. José, his eyes fastened on Smoking Mountain and his lips moving in prayer, gave them no heed.

They had brought along a demijohn of water, which Pablo tied to the ramshackle saddle on Rosita's back. Lou looked through a box of canned goods and other groceries which one of the boatmen had dropped on the beach, and set aside a few items that he thought it might be advisable to take along.

His hands stopped when he came to two square quart-size bottles labeled "Gin." This discovery pretty well confirmed his suspicion that the strangers had been drinking. And drunken men of their type, experience had taught him, were invariably dangerous.

Instinct had already warned Parnell that he and the newcomers were not likely to get along well. He thought of Chona, Rita, and Juana, who might conceivably require protection from these toughs. Liquor at Hotunikat would almost certainly precipitate trouble.

On an impulse he flung both bottles into the sea.

"Hey, whatcha mean by that?" snarled Green, one hand on the handle of his revolver. "Whose hooch you throwin' away? You one of them dry bulls?"

"No. But booze won't do you any good when you're dragging yourself across those dunes, with the heat boiling up like slag in a furnace and the sun frying every particle of moisture out of your system. We can't take along any extra weight, either."

"Say, where do you figure in this deal, anyway?" Green's evil, red-veined face was so close that Parnell whiffed the reek of his breath.

"Now, now, pardner," Hendricks interrupted placatingly. "I expect he's right. Say, friend, what's your name, anyway?"

Parnell deliberately turned his back. "You fellows better fill your skins full of water before we start," he said over his shoulder. "Soak out as much alcohol as you can."

Green and Hendricks grumblingly followed his advice and, with many wry faces, drank deeply at the spring.

"Let's make tracks," urged Green. "If we ain't back in ten days, when that blasted catboat comes back from the head of the gulf, the skipper'll charge me a hundred bones for every day he has to wait."

Before the party was half a mile inland the new members were lagging behind. Fervently they cursed the heat, the sand that burned through the soles of their shoes, the white glare that seared their bloodshot eyesballs. Lou paid no attention to them until the noise of their quarreling suddenly ceased. Looking back, he saw that each had a pocket flask to his lips.

"None of that," he yelled, his temper already strained to the breaking point.

"What's it to you, little white Indian?" spat Green.

"Nothing, really; only I'm not disposed to go to the trouble of packing you in after you collapse. No man can load himself up with gin and keep going in this fire box."

"Aw, one little drink won't do us any harm," argued Green. "Help us to stand the heat. Better have some with us."

"You birds have the choice of leaving that booze right here or of turning back."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. I don't know why I'm going to so much trouble to save you two birds unless it's a natural disinclination to see anybody commit suicide. But my mind's made up."

Lou's rifle was at his hip. The muzzle descended threateningly. There was a gleam in his eye that told them this mild-mannered, taciturn, shabby young fellow meant business.

Hendricks' bottle fell at his feet. The clear liquor gurgled forth and was instantaneously absorbed by the thirsty sand.

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," Green submitted sullenly, and tossed his flask away.

Scarcely another word passed between the travelers save when Green and Hendricks begged profanely for water, as they did every few minutes. They would have gulped a gallon at a time had Parnell allowed them to do so. Quart after quart they swilled, and cried for more. They swore that their lips and tongues were swelling.

Lou doled out their scanty supply of liquid, giving them only as much as he judged they absolutely must have. At that, both the demijohn and the canteen were dry two hours before sunset.

Sometimes Parnell and the Areneños drew as much as half a mile ahead, then waited for the weary stragglers to overtake them. As a result, progress was painfully slow. Night had come and the stars were out when they trailed into Hotunikat.

The treasure seekers, last to drag their exhausted frames into the village, sank down under the *jacal*, virtually unconscious. Lou threw cold water into their faces until they were revived sufficiently to resume their lurid cursing of the country and each other. Finally he gave them some jerky and deerskins and left them to their own devices.

"Where's old Rain-in-the-face?" Hendricks growled the next morning when Lou stepped around to inquire how Hotunikat's guests were faring. "Tell him to toddle over here right pronto. We've got no time to waste in this corner of Hades."

"You mean José, I presume. He left

at daylight for the crater of the volcano."

"Do you mean he's gone up there to get the stuff?"

"No; he has gone up to ask the gods of Smoking Mountain whether you are the persons entitled to receive the 'stuff.' He took the little eruption yesterday as a warning."

"The slab-sided, dirty-livered, thievin' old son of a sea cook! Why, we've got the bronze god, haven't we? What more does he want?"

"Don't ask me. I haven't the faintest idea what any of this is about. Anyway, he's gone with Pablo and he won't be back for at least two days."

"Two days!" fumed Green. "We've got to roast in this oven two days while that darned savage runs around and says his prayers to some heathen joss?

"Say, bo, I'll tell you what you do. You chase right after him and bring him back here, and I'll pound some sense into his dirty hide. Give you fifty berries if you will. Yes, a hundred."

"No, thanks. I don't know anything about the trails up on El Monte—if there are any. Besides, it would be just as easy to control the volcano itself as to change José's mind.

"The medicine man orders his whole life by what he reads in the volcano's smoke, and maybe the fires that smolder down in the crater. You'd better just take it easy until he returns."

"Sure, that's all we can do, Al," smirked Hendricks. He jerked his thumb toward Chona and Rita, who were curiously surveying the scene from a distance of thirty or forty yards. "Not such bad lookers—what?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TALE OF THE BRONZE GOD.

BETTER come with me to-day," Parnell told the women, and they needed no second hint. Armed with both his revolver and his carbine, and carrying little Viapo pick-a-back, he led the way to the garden. They spent the whole day there, working and lounging in the shade.

Lou did a lot of hard thinking without arriving at any definite conclusions. José's whims and superstitions were so reasonless and unpredictable that nothing could be done except to let matters take their course.

It was evident that something of value had been left with José by an American named Captain Frayne. A treasure of some description—perhaps gold, or pearls from the gulf. The bronze god was obviously some sort of a token. How Green and Hendricks had happened along at this juncture, he could not guess. But he was very positive that they had no just claim to the treasure. If any one was entitled to benefit, it was probably the Indians. But to make José see that——"

When the westering sun was within half an hour of the horizon the industrious farmers decided to return to the village. Lou Parnell had already picked up Viapo and started ahead when Juana called out in Areneño, which by now he understood fairly well:

"Look! People are coming. Two men and a woman, on horses. The men are Indians but the woman is no squaw."

The strangers approached from the north and were already halfway across the dry bed of the arroyo. "They have seen us and are heading this way," Lou remarked.

Certainly the woman was no squaw; her broad, floppy hat and khaki riding skirt told him that much. Furthermore, she sat erect in the saddle; but there was something discouraged, pathetic, and utterly weary in her attitude. Her companions were smaller and fatter than Areneños and Juana guessed that they were Cocopahs from the mouth of the Colorado River.

"Good afternoon!" Parnell greeted, sweeping off his battered sombrero.

"What?" she cried, joy and relief lighting up a face that had once been blond and probably pretty but was now cruelly burned by the desert sun. "A white man here?"

"Reasonably white. May I assist you to alight?"

"You may. And a drink, please. Our water gave out three hours ago."

He had thought her slight of build but found her no light load when he lifted her to the ground. And he noted a determined set to the chin. This girl, he guessed, could not be easily turned aside from any task that she might undertake.

After she had quenched her thirst she thanked him, dropped tiredly on a log and said with a wan smile:

"I suppose you're wondering what brings me into this desert. Well, I'm looking for a tribe of Indians called the Areneños."

"These women are Areneños. The village is just down the gulch." Then, at a wild venture, he added:

"Do you bring a bronze god?"

She went deathly white under her sunburn and gasped:

"What do you know of a bronze god?"

"Not a thing. I was more or less shooting at random. It just happens that two men brought one here yesterday."

"They're here? Howard and Green?"

"One of them is called Green but the other goes by the name of Hendricks."

"Howard Hendricks, my cousin. It was he who stole the bronze god from me. And Green, who is an agent for a syndicate of rum runners, must have put up the money for the trip, as Howard had none. How did they come?"

"In a trading schooner."

"Have they got the——"

"Not yet. The custodian of whatever it is they came for suspects them."

She stretched out her hands imploringly. "Oh, I must have help. Will you help me? There is no one else whom I can ask. And you look so—so honest and dependable."

"Thanks! I am certainly not disposed to throw in with those crooks. If you will tell me the whole story we may be able to forestall them somehow."

"Very well. I am from San Francisco and my name is Jessica Frayne. Captain Luther Frayne was my uncle."

"Ah! So we are at last to learn something of the mysterious Captain Frayne."

"He was a seaman, and what you might call a soldier of fortune as well. Once, in San Diego, he befriended a starving Indian who said that he was the hereditary medicine man of the Areneños and had been shanghaied while fishing along the shore."

"Ah, yes. José."

"The Indian told my uncle that if he would bring him home he would show him a place up the coast from Smoking Mountain that was rich in placer gold. The captain recruited a crew of men who knew something of mining and promised them a quarter of the proceeds of the expedition.

"They sailed down the Pacific and up into the Gulf of California. José kept his word and showed them gold. They spent several weeks there, washing out nuggets and dust. When the deposit was worked out they started home. The Indian was to be put ashore near his village, which was at the foot of a volcano.

"A division of the gold was made in accordance with the agreement. Two sailors warned my uncle that there was a plot afoot to kill him and seize the vessel.

"José was rowed ashore at night by Captain Frayne and the two loyal men. With him went a large sea chest. The others thought it was filled with bedding and other gifts, but it was really filled with nearly three hundred pounds of gold.

"Captain Frayne was an old man then, and a sufferer from inflammatory rheumatism. He doubted if he would ever be able to come for the gold himself. So he gave José a little bronze god from his cabin collection and told him that if he had to send a representative, the representative would carry another idol just like it."

"The mystery is beginning to clear," Parnell commented. "Go on."

"Well, the crew mutinied. Both the loyal men were murdered, and Captain Frayne was badly wounded. He told the mutineers what he had done with the gold, and dared them to turn back and look for it. Of course they knew that José would have it well hidden by that time, and they would never catch him.

"They must have become frightened for they put in at some lower California port and deserted. Captain Frayne was found dead in his bunk. In his hand was a bronze god with a note requesting that it be delivered to his brother, my father.

"The god never reached my father, who had died suddenly. And he was the only person, except my uncle, who knew that it was hollow. My mother turned it over to me as a keepsake.

"About a month ago I ran across the little Buddha in an old trunk where it had been stored and forgotten for years. While handling it I accidentally pressed a knob on the back and the head came off. Inside I found a letter from Captain Frayne, telling the whole story as I've told it to you.

"My mother, who is an invalid, became very much excited. She insisted on showing the letter to her nephew, Howard Hendricks, who is our only living relative, and suggested that he go for the gold. This was against my judgment for I knew that he had fallen in with evil companions, particularly this man Green.

"Howard scouted the whole thing as a 'fairy tale' and declared that if the gold had ever existed it had long ago been turned into money by the Indians. But two nights later the bronze god was stolen from my room, and at the same time my cousin disappeared. I was morally certain that he had come to the Areneño country in search of the treasure. As I couldn't get a ship to bring me here, I traveled by rail to Yuma and there hired these two Indians as guides. We left that place nearly a week ago, and here I am."

CHAPTER IX.

A SUMMONS FOR ALVARADO.

PARNELL sketched to Jessica Frayne the situation as it stood at Hotunikat. "So, you see, much depends on the message that José receives from his gods," he concluded. "The volcano may tell him that Green and Hendricks have no right to the gold. In that event we'll have to protect him from their anger, perhaps hide him until they give up and go away. After that we may be able to persuade him that you are the real owner."

"But if the volcano tells him that the gold belongs to them—what then?"

"That will complicate matters badly. I can only tell you, as I told them, that we must wait on José."

She seemed very much depressed. "Oh, help me," she repeated. "I'll do anything. I'll give you part of the gold."

"No, Miss Frayne, I am not bargaining for any reward for myself. I'm more than willing to do what I can, just to see that justice is done. But I do think that faithful old José and his people ought to have a share. That's only fair. A third, say."

"Certainly! Certainly! I'll agree to that."

"That's settled, then. Now, as I see it, there's no use in letting Green and Hendricks know that you are here. We

can't tell what they might try to do. Better camp up there in that thicket with your Indians. You have a revolver, haven't you? Can you use it if necessary?"

She nodded.

"Well, I hope it won't come to that. Adios! I'll bring you blankets and food."

"Please! We're entirely out, and I'm famished."

The women and Viapo had gone on. Parnell overtook them near the village, where they were crouching behind some brush. They made alarmed gestures toward the *jacal,* where a fire gleamed through the dust.

In the firelight stood two saddled horses with drooping heads and bridle reins trailing on the ground. Farther back, four men were playing cards. Hendricks' falsetto voice was wailing ribald snatches from "Champagne Shusie, my Boozy Flusie."

"The Mexicans from El Castillo," whispered Juana.

Parnell could see now that Firmin Alvarado, Tula's father, and Bernardo Salgun, her betrothed, were with Green and Hendricks. A bottle was passing from hand to hand.

What to do was a problem. Were the Mexicans bent on a belated revenge? He recalled Tula's warning that he should never go unarmed. Parnell and the Areneños were hungry; Miss Frayne and her guides were out of provisions; there was little food to be had outside the village, and to slip in without being seen was next to impossible.

After a moment's consideration he motioned the squaws to remain where they were and walked boldly forward.

Green looked up and saw him. "Well, if here ain't little self-denial himself—the wineless wonder!" he mocked. "Come and have a drink. Tequila. Centipede juice with all the kick left in. Our new pals brought it. Whole lot more friendly than you are, 'at's a fact. Been treatin' us like the duke's grandfather."

With an oath Salgun seized the flask that Green held out invitingly. "No!" he hissed. "I do not drink with that dog."

"Shut up!" snapped Alvarado, and Salgun subsided with many black looks from beneath his frowning brows.

"Come on," Green continued. "Mighty smooth stuff!"

Parnell declined with a shake of his head.

"Heh?" snarled Green. "Say, Little Lord Fauntleroy, we're onto your game. But you ain't gonna get away with it, see?"

"Game?" queried Lou.

"We know you've sneaked the old man off into the hills to keep him hid from us."

"Yeah, and you're keepin' your little brown sweethearts hid from us, too," Hendricks accused. "Such a selfish hog I never saw."

Parnell was quivering with disgust and rage. "If you rats know so much, why don't you do something about it?"

This defiance astonished Green. His jaw wavered fitfully and his eyes popped out. But before he could speak they all heard the sound of a galloping horse.

Another Mexican rode into view, waving a letter in the air.

"Important news, Don Firmin. Just brought by a messenger from Hermosillo. Señorita Tula sent me down this way to find you."

Alvarado tore open the envelope. "Important news!" he exclaimed. "Of the gravest importance. The revolution has started and within a week my party will attack the State capital. I have been chosen to lead the assault.

"Come, Bernardo. We must start tonight."

"What's your hurry?" objected Green. "You haven't heard that little proposition we want to make. May be money in it for you."

"I have no time for propositions nor for money-making. Farewell!"

The three revolutionists dashed off into the darkness. Parnell, as he stepped into a hut and began to cram a bag full of *camotes* and jerked meat, smiled with satisfaction. An alliance between Green and Hendricks and the Alvarado gang would have been a serious upset for the nebulous plans that were taking shape in his mind.

His smile faded when the realization burst upon him that he would never see Tula again. For, of course, she would go with her father.

He cautioned the Areneño women against letting the white men see them. They slept through the night in a wikiup well removed from the *jacal.* Parnell stretched across the doorway, weapons at his side. It was long after midnight before his seething thoughts would let him sleep.

CHAPTER X.

THE VERDICT OF THE GODS.

THE sun was half an hour above Smoking Mountain when Chona shook Parnell into wakefulness. "One of the Mexicans is coming back," she yelled into his ear.

He grabbed his carbine and winked his eyes hard to clear their vision. Fifty yards away was Bernardo Salgun, hatless, black hair flying in the wind. At every jump he spurred and quirted a spent sorrel pony that drew its breath in agonized wheezes.

Salgun was apparently headed for the *jacal;* but at sight of Parnell he swerved in his direction, flourishing a revolver and screaming curses.

"Where is she? Where is she? You gringo hound, if you have harmed her I'll cut your heart out. I'll——"

He yanked viciously on the reins. The exhausted pony spread out its feet, slid in the sand and tumbled over on its side.

Salgun went sprawling. He clung to his revolver but before he could raise his hand the muzzle of Parnell's rifle was within a foot of his chest.

"Drop it. If you think I won't shoot just——"

Salgun obeyed. His cheeks were ashen but his lips were parted in a defiant snarl.

"Now tell me what all this is about. What do you want?"

"Where is she?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"My Tula. My promised wife."

"Why should I know? She isn't here."

"That's a lie. She came here to join you."

"You must have been drinking something stronger than tequila. I haven't seen the señorita in a week."

Salgun glanced into the hut, then his eyes swept the village. "She left us in the darkness as she did the night she saved you," he muttered, half apologetically. "Her father could not turn back so I came for her alone."

"Well, you're certainly on a wild-goose chase. Look! Your horse is dead. How are you going to find her now, afoot?"

Indubitably the abused sorrel was dead. "The Indian has a mare," Salgun said thoughtfully.

"She is not here, either. You have made a big fool of yourself. I have no doubt that the young woman is quite safe."

Green and Hendricks had witnessed the scene and were approaching hesitantly. Parnell signaled to them to come on.

"I believe this fellow is a friend of yours," he said. "Better take care of him. No, I'll keep the six-shooter."

Salgun walked with them toward the *jacal.* Parnell abstractedly ate the breakfast that the Areneño woman placed before him, warned them again to keep out of sight, and set off up the arroyo to see Jessica Frayne.

Upon rounding a corner of the garden

fence he found himself face to face with Tula, sitting on a log and holding Chapo's lead rope. Her eyes blazed into his accusingly from a face that was lined with fatigue and anxiety.

"Who is that woman who is camped up the wash?"

He laughed at her vehemence, which made her all the angrier.

"A Miss Frayne, from San Francisco."

"You told me you had no *novia.*"

"She is not my sweetheart. I never saw her before last night."

"Why is she here?"

"That's a long story. She has come for a chest of gold that her uncle left with José many years ago. And two men are also claiming it. I have agreed to help her if she will give the Indians a share."

She held out her hands. "I'm sorry. And of course I had no right to ask in the first place. But when I saw her through the bushes I thought that you had lied to me, and I was on my way to save you again, and—and——"

"To save me again. From what?" he asked.

"Those men you mentioned. They are waiting for a good chance to murder you because they think you stand between them and something they want. I overheard my father and Bernardo talking about it."

"You are certainly my guardian angel, Tula. What you tell me about those blackguards doesn't surprise me a bit. But now that you have put me on my guard you must hurry on and rejoin your father. Salgun is here, afoot, but I don't suppose you care about helping him."

"He followed me? Where is he?"

"With Green and Hendricks."

"Ah! Your three enemies together. That means that you are in terrible danger. Bernardo would have slain you before this but for my father. I shall stay."

"Why—you can't. You're insane to think of such a thing."

"Then come away with me."

"You know I can't do that. Not without breaking my word to Miss Frayne and playing false to my Areneño friends."

"Then I shall stay."

"Where?"

"Somewhere about, watching and ready to aid you."

All his pleas and arguments could not change her. Finally he proposed that she remain with Jessica Frayne until José's return, and she consented at least to make the white woman's acquaintance.

Miss Frayne welcomed them warmly, pressed food upon the Mexican girl and insisted that she lie down to rest. Parnell stayed there most of the day, chatting on a variety of topics and assuring the captain's niece that all would yet turn out well. Tula was oddly reserved and took little part in their conversation.

Late in the afternoon Parnell left them and cut southward to a trail that José and Pablo would probably use in coming off the mountain. He took up his station and waited until they came along, just at sundown. The medicine man was riding Rosita and Pablo trotted behind.

Parnell's heart sank when Pablo shook his head. His hopes that the die of fate would be cast against the false claimants to Captain Frayne's fortune were dashed.

"What is the decision, José?" he asked the old man.

"That I obey my friend's command and turn the gold over to the messengers who brought his bronze god. All night I prayed to the spirit of fire. I threw green bushes into the lava and read the smoke. I sacrificed a live rabbit that Pablo caught. The message was always the same."

"But those *ladrones* stole the idol. They stole it from your friend's niece.

The treasure is hers by right. And now she is here to ask you to give it to her."

"She lies. The gods said nothing about a woman."

José whipped up Rosita and pushed on. Parnell loped along at his side, pleading and cajoling, but all to no avail. The stubborn old shaman vouchsafed not another word.

They entered the village. Green and Hendricks came tearing out to meet them. In reply to their frantic questions José stated that he would lead them to the hiding place of the gold on the morrow.

Salgun strolled forward leisurely. With a start of surprise Parnell observed that he bore a Winchester rifle in his hands.

How had the Mexican, deprived of his revolver that morning, contrived to arm himself?

Then Parnell remembered that Salgun always carried a gun in a saddle scabbard. The pony, in dying, had stretched out on its left side and hidden the weapon. Tula's lover had merely bided his time and returned for it as soon as Lou was out of sight.

CHAPTER XI.

A REVERSAL OF JUDGMENT.

THAT night Louis Parnell was a very unhappy young man. He felt that he had terribly bungled the business of circumventing Green and Hendricks, now reinforced by Salgun who evinced no intention of leaving. He had counted strongly on the gods of the mountain deciding against them and had neglected to formulate any definite program for coping with the present emergency. His neglect to disarm Salgun completely when he had the opportunity was, in his own view, almost criminal.

"I'm stumped," he confessed to Jessica Frayne. "Of course I might manage to kidnap José, but if I did I would earn his undying enmity and he would never take us to the gold. Besides, that might turn all the Areneños against us. Pablo smiles at the old man's spirits but he believes in them just the same.

"Whatever I do may as easily be the wrong thing as the right. Perhaps we'd better just let him show them the way to the treasure to-morrow; then we'll at least know where it is. The chances are that when they have it they'll start fighting among themselves."

"Bernardo will try to take it away from them," Tula predicted. "I know him."

"Well, if they kill each other like Kilkenny cats it won't be our responsibility. We'll just give them the chance. I'm going along to-morrow to see what happens."

Tula protested swiftly that he would be exposing himself to needless peril.

"But I must keep an eye on Bernardo," he reminded her. "What if he should shoot all of them, perhaps hide the gold in a new place, and come back for it at his leisure."

"That is probably what he is planning to do. But he will kill you, too."

"Not with Pablo and myself watching every move he makes. Good night."

The start was made at sunrise. José and Rosita led the procession, with Pablo at the mare's heels. Parnell brought up the rear. Nobody seemed to pay much attention to him.

"Those fellows probably think they've got me licked," he mused. "The time must be pretty near when I'll have to prove that they're wrong."

José led them across the mesa to the east, then around the northwest shoulder of Smoking Mountain. Green and Hendricks, blithe and jovial at first, soon fell to swearing and complaining. Cactus spines pierced their inadequate shoes; catclaw thorns ripped their trousers and scratched their legs. It was another blistering hot day and they were continually bawling to José to stop and give them water. Hendricks sniveled

that they should have "brought along a few flunkies to do the hard work," and Green snapped that there were "too dad-blamed many bozos in on this deal already."

After three or four miles, José swerved to the right and up an arroyo. The canteen and demijohn were refilled at a scummy pool surrounded by the tracks of deer, sheep and pumas.

From there the route—there was no trail—lay sharply upward. All vegetation disappeared. Evidences of volcanic action became more pronounced. Where black lava did not lie, the ground was covered by gray volcanic ash that smelled like sulphur when raised by the feet of the travelers.

Mixed in with the ash, Parnell noted large and small chunks of blue-stained stone that proved to be very heavy when he lifted it. In one spot a narrow ledge of the same material pushed up to the surface.

"I'm no geologist," he said to Salgun, "but that looks like copper ore to me."

"There is much copper hereabouts," the Mexican replied. "Some day, when General Alvarado is president of Mexica, I shall come back here and find a rich mine."

Although the way was rough, the heat was tempered by feathery white clouds that rolled in from the Gulf, presaging the early coming of the summer rainy season. Part of the time the sun's face was wholly covered.

Slowly they neared the blunt rim of the crater. Here and there they skirted a dark hole, a dead fumarole with hues of bright orange and dull brass about its throat.

"How much farther?" Hendricks whined. "Another mile of this'll kill me. My feet!"

Salgun smiled and caressed his rifle. "There's murder in that smile," Lou thought with a shudder of revulsion.

Without the slightest warning the air was filled with a mighty roar that almost ruptured their eardrums. The whole mountain trembled and huge boulders went crashing down toward the mesa below. Smoking cinders rained on every hand. Up from the volcano's belly gushed a dense, black swirling cloud.

Rosita was rearing and plunging. Pablo caught her bridle. José tumbled off to prostrate himself before his plutonic gods.

From one of the old fumaroles poured another cloud, lemon-yellow in color. One whiff sent Parnell reeling giddily, stung his nostrils maddeningly.

In mortal terror he sprang away down a draw, remembering his all but fatal experience when the volcano "breathed upon him" before. He held his breath until his lungs were nigh to bursting. At last he could stand it no longer. He opened his mouth and gulped.

The air was sweet.

He heard a noise behind him. Rosita, like himself, had taken the easiest route away from the fumarole, which had now ceased to smoke. He caught her, patted her quivering shoulder a moment, and tied her to a needle of stone.

His five companions were lying face downward whether they had fallen, apparently unconscious.

Holding his handkerchief to his face, he sprinted back. At that instant a gust of torrid wind dissipated the poisonous gas. He turned Pablo over and worked his arms like pistons.

The Indian sat up with a dazed look on his stolid face. Parnell turned to José, who was already halfway back to life. Groans and curses came from the other three assuring him that they were in no need of assistance.

Salgun was holding a bandanna to the left side of his head and grimacing with pain. A cinder had struck him under the left ear and raised a blister.

"Close call, that," puffed Green. "Thought I was a goner for a minute. This is what I'd call an unhealthy neigh-

borhood. Say, José, let's get on to the gold and lug it off this powder magazine as quick as Old Nick'll let us!"

"No. We go back."

"Go back? Whatcha mean? You scared?"

"Gods angry. They don't want you to have the gold to-day."

"To-day? What about to-morrow?"

"Maybe so. Can't tell."

"You're a filthy, low-down, double-crossin' old liar. Didn't the gods tell you yesterday that the stuff was ours?"

"I misunderstood. They will kill us if we go on now."

Green and Hendricks stormed and blustered, almost frothed at the mouth. They threatened dire vengeance unless José continued straight to the gold. Apparently he did not hear them. He gazed steadily at the thinning fog above the crater.

Salgun glanced speculatively from Parnell to the medicine man. "You'll never persuade an Indian that way," he said finally. "Might as well go on back. Maybe his gods will give him some other orders later."

CHAPTER XII.

THE ENEMY STRIKES.

IT'S positively funny, and at the same time tragic," Parnell declared that evening in reporting the day's odd occurrence to Jessica Frayne and Tula Alvarado. "Here we're all sitting around on pins and needles, waiting on the superstitious vagaries of a superannuated savage who is guided solely by an erratic volcano that may go back to sleep or blow the whole country to pieces at any minute.

"You should have heard Green and Hendricks railing at him just now. Madder than two horned lizards in one can. It's a treat to see him ignore them. Just went inside his lodge and began to pound on an old rawhide drum and chant to the mountain.

"And Bernardo sits on his heels and grins and smokes cigarettes faster than he can roll them. He has something up his sleeve, that fellow. I'd like to know what it is."

"Has he asked any more about me?" Tula inquired.

"No. He's satisfied that you aren't with me so he isn't worrying any about you. It isn't just because he has no horse that he's sticking around, either. Señor Salgun has ambitions to get his hands on that gold, and I'm betting that he won't be content with any split that our friends from Frisco offer to make."

Miss Frayne was fearful and timid, her nerves worn to a frazzle by the strain. She even expressed doubts as to her Cocopahs and asked Lou to sleep somewhere near her camp that night.

"I will if it will make you feel any easier," he agreed. "But Tula is able to give you better protection than I can."

So he fetched a blanket and bunked down beside the garden fence, under the soft stars and the cirrus clouds that raced across the sky The nocturnal halo of crimson that crowned Smoking Mountain was more vivid than he had ever seen it before.

"Good old hill!" he murmured. "Now if you'll only keep on batting on our side——"

For two days absolutely nothing happened except that the situation grew more tense with every moment. José continued grumpy and uncommunicative. Green, Hendricks, and Salgun spent most of their time in quarrelsome consultation. They seemed to be afraid to get out of sight of the medicine man's hut.

Parnell became haggard from the suspense. He knew that the situation could not continue indefinitely, that an explosion of some kind was inevitable, and he feared that when it came some of his friends would suffer. A partial clearing of the decks was effected by sending the Areneño women and little Viapo out into the hills to gather saguaro fruit,

with instructions not to return for at least a week. Green and Hendricks pointedly asked the "squaw man" where his "family" might be, but he pretended not to hear the insult.

The only one who seemed to be at all happy was Tula. Her only anxiety was Lou's safety. She was continually warning him against Salgun.

"Why do you go to so much trouble for the sake of this pale, selfish girl?" Tula demanded one day when they were alone. "You are too chivalrous, Señor Luis."

"It isn't all chivalry," he denied. "Of course, she's an American woman beset by a crew of rascals in a foreign land and it's nothing more than my duty to help her if I can. But she has agreed to give the Areneños a third of the gold, and after what they did for me I'd be a pretty poor specimen if I didn't try to help them get it. A little money to buy cattle, to drill wells and build dams in the arroyos, would make them independent."

One morning he was awakened by a patter of warm rain; the first summer shower had come. After seeing that the Cocopahs covered all Jessica Frayne's camp equipment with canvas, and that the girls themselves found shelter under an overhanging bluff, he set off for the village to get another sackful of jerked mutton.

To his amazement, the place appeared absolutely deserted. There was no one under the *jacal*. And the little corral down near the wash, where Pablo kept Rosita, was empty.

Really alarmed, Parnell pelted in that direction. He found Pablo tightly and expertly trussed to a post with his own hair ropes and a stick of mesquite in his mouth.

"What the blue blazes does this mean?" Lou demanded, as he removed the gag and began to loosen the Indian's bonds. "Who did it?"

"I don't know which crept up and hit me on the head while I slept. But all three of them tied me here and took Rosita away."

"Where could they be going? To hunt for the treasure themselves?"

"Don't know. We'll track 'em."

"Does José know anything about it?"

"He's not up yet."

Parnell ran to the medicine lodge, pushed aside the tanned cougar skin that hung across the doorway, and looked within. The interior was in the wildest disorder, as though a terrible struggle had taken place there.

José was gone.

"So that's their game," Parnell commented tensely. "Going to torture the poor old devil into revealing the gold to them. You're dead right, Pablo. We'll track 'em. Lead on."

Pablo had already located the trail, which was broad and plain. It led southeast.

Like a hound on a scent, Pablo coursed through the sagebrush and greasewood bushes. He was armed only with his bow, a quiver of arrows, and a hunting knife. Lou, loaded with his carbine and a belt of cartridges, had all he could do to keep up with him.

Before they had gone half a mile the sprinkle that had routed Parnell out of bed was renewed. Then the heavens opened. They were drenched to the skin in a moment. Every depression became a pond, every rabbit path a rivulet. The atmosphere, warm and humid a few minutes before, became almost frigid.

The trail was completely obliterated.

"N-never mind about the tracks," Parnell chattered. "They must be taking him to the caves where the Mexicans used to stay. Up this way somewhere, aren't they?"

"Over there," Pablo replied, pointing toward Smoking Mountain.

"Let's go, then!"

They went. But Parnell's guess was a bad one. Until nearly noon they re-

connoitered the caves, straining their eyes for some sign of life. Finally they walked into one, which had evidently been used as a stable. Piles of mesquite beans and dried grass littered one end of the cave.

Another of the caverns was almost as large, with a high roof and fairly smooth floor. This appeared to have been used as a lounging room and general headquarters for the bandits. Far in the rear was a heavy sheet-iron door, hung on huge bolts and secured by a big brass padlock. Several iron rings were set firmly into the wall.

"I see now how Alvarado held his prisoners," Parnell remarked. "But nobody has been here for several days, anyway. Let's go back to Hotunikat."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WILES OF AN INDIAN.

WHEN Parnell told her of the kidnaping, Jessica Frayne turned white and wrung her hands. "I'll never see my gold now," she lamented. "My journey to this terrible country, and all that I have endured here, are for nothing."

"Your gold's safe enough," he returned irritably. He was weary and sweaty, for the clouds had vanished and the sun again beat down with mid-summer fervor.

"What I'm worried about is José," he went on. "I know him and I know that he'll die before he gives up his secret unwillingly. But think of the torment that he may be undergoing at this very minute. Knives—hot irons—Heaven knows what.

"He's just a childish old Indian, Miss Frayne, with a lot of exasperating fancies and superstitions. But for many a long year he was true to your uncle's trust when he could easily have used the gold himself, when he'd have been justified in doing so. Such loyalty is rare. Aside from all that, he's a helpless human being in the hands of a bunch of fiends absolutely without mercy."

"José must be found," Tula agreed calmly. She was already saddling Chapo. Her red lips were drawn in a straight line of resolution and her sombrero was pushed back at a determined angle.

"Where do you think they have taken him?"

"There are a hundred places. The hills are honeycombed with caves. And there's water everywhere now. I can only search."

"Don't think that I'm going to sit here idle. May I use your horse, Miss Frayne?"

To Parnell's utter amazement she threw her arms about his neck and pressed her face in terror against his shoulder.

"Don't leave me alone," she entreated piteously. "Not that! Oh, I'm so frightened. I wish I had never come."

"There, there, Miss Frayne. That's no way to talk. Surely you're not going to pieces after being brave so long. You're in no danger whatever."

Gently he disengaged her arms. He looked appealingly toward Tula, who resolutely kept her back turned toward them.

Pablo also insisted that he was going and persuaded one of the Cocopahs to lend him a pony.

As they set forth it occurred to Parnell that their expedition was perilous to the point of foolhardiness. It would be such a simple matter for the enemy to observe them from afar and lay an ambush. Tula, riding ahead at a brisk pace, seemed never to think of that. At least, neither of them mentioned the possibility.

That afternoon gave Parnell a new conception of the vast extent and the ruggedness of the district that lay southwest of Smoking Mountain. They covered several square miles of jagged foothills—limestone and sandstone with an overlay of dark volcanic materials on

the higher levels. Gullies and canyons crisscrossed the terrain Lou frequently saw blue-green copper ore, "float," washed down from the ledges up on the mountain.

Little grew here except a few tenacious cacti, crucfixion thorn bushes, and those weird freaks called boojum trees. Occasionally there was a bunch of the coarse gallet grass that mountain sheep love.

They were looking for tracks; but as there had been several showers since that first morning downpour, Parnell was convinced that only by the merest accident could they hope to strike a trail. Tula had spoken truly when she said that there was nothing to be done except to search.

Wonderingly, and with an admiration that was not wholly impersonal, he gazed upon the slim, straight form that rode before him. He recalled that he had never seen Tula Alvarado in skirts, but always in those velvet trousers and that beaded jacket and never without the pearl-handled revolver at her waist.

What sort of a person would she be in an environment less harsh and lawless? Softly feminine? Why, she was all that in spite of her dress and the whirl of fantastic events into which she had been drawn since that night at the spring. He remembered the fierce tenderness with which she had fought for his life in opposition to the direct commands of her ruthless father.

And she had returned to Hotunikat for no purpose except to aid and protect him; now she was unhesitatingly rushing to succor a half-mad old savage. Or had she come back just to escape from Salgun? No; if that were her object she would have left just as soon as the Mexican appeared and interested himself in the treasure.

Parnell gave it up. Anyway, there was little time for speculation or retrospection.

The lowering sun told him that they had swung well to the west, still farther from Smoking Mountain, when his own judgment was that José would be held at some point near the spot where he had turned back on his way to the gold. In another hour it would be dark.

Suddenly Pablo threw up his hand. The party came to a dead halt. Parnell could hear nothing save the pounding of his heart and the breathing of the jaded horses.

"Rosita," said the Indian.

Finally Lou could hear the crunch of hoofs in wet gravel, approaching down a narrow wash. He fingered the trigger of his carbine, then dropped off lightly and advanced.

To his surprise, Tula trod softly at his side. Pablo, who had only his ironwood bow and knew little of firearms, remained to hold their horses.

"Go back," he whispered.

She disregarded his order. They knelt behind a large boulder, their bodies almost touching. She was perfectly calm, he saw; the only evidence of excitement was a slight paling of the rich tan in her cheeks.

With maddening slowness the oncoming horse plodded down the gulch. Finally it rounded a bench.

"José!"

It was the medicine man, alone. He was slumped far over in the saddle.

His old eyes lighted with thankfulness when he saw Parnell and Tula. His nephew came running and caught him as he slid off.

José's left sleeve was bloody. A bullet had plowed a furrow through the stringy muscle of his left upper arm.

With soft coos of sympathy and encouragement, Tula bound the wound with Lou's big handkerchief. They gave José water and he insisted almost at once that he was able to proceed. As he rode along he spoke a few Areneño phrases that Pablo translated.

José's escape had been simple, but cunningly planned and executed. He

was on horseback while all his captors were afoot. They did not think it worth while to bind him. Salgun walked ahead, leading the mare by a short rope. He, as well as Green and Hendricks, was hunched up with the cold and cursing the rain.

The Indian waited for his opportunity. Suddenly he lashed Rosita in the flank. Startled, she sprang ahead and knocked Salgun sprawling. Then he guided her up a side canyon.

A fusillade of bullets had been fired after him through the driving rain. Only one had struck, but the shock stunned him. He kept on flailing Rosita and she kept on carrying him farther from home. Eventually, weakness had compelled him to dismount. He did not know how long he lay unconscious while rain peppered down intermittently, washing out the tracks behind him. When he recovered his senses he started directly for the village.

It was long after moonrise when they got José back to Hotunikat. On the latter part of the journey they were lighted by the volcano's glow, which cast an eerie pink radiance over the landscape.

Leaving the wounded man to the doctoring of Tula and Pablo, Lou rode up the arroyo to Jessica Frayne's camp.

Miss Frayne was not there. She had been carried off by the three renegades who had kidnaped José.

CHAPTER XIV.

"JUST A TENDERFOOT."

IT was impossible to drag any coherent story out of the Cocopahs, who were dull-witted fellows far below the level of the Areneños in intelligence. As Parnell finally pieced it together, Salgun, Green and Hendricks had returned to Hotunikat, probably under the assumption that José would make his way back there as soon as possible. They found that their water *ollas* at the *jacal* had not been filled that day, so went hunting for the spring. And there they caught sight of the camp in the arroyo.

Green and Hendricks had been astounded, Parnell gathered, to find Jessica Frayne there. She had been too frightened, or too surprised, even to attempt to use her revolver to defend herself. In fact, she had been almost immediately disarmed. After a violent altercation she had been bundled on the remaining horse and bustled off toward the south. That was all the Indians knew.

José was resting comfortably among his sacred religious paraphernalia when Lou called Tula outside to break the news of the latest calamity. She heard him through in silence.

"They have taken her to the castle, of course," she said when he had finished.

"What castle?"

"That is what my father always called the caves where he stayed with his men. He had a chamber fitted up there, with an iron door, for the confinement of prisoners. Bernardo has a key. I'm sure now that they meant to take José there, only he got away."

"You know the ground. How can we rescue her?"

"We can't. It's impossible. You have been there and you know that to reach the caves we would have to cross an open swale, quite wide. And that glow from the volcano makes everything almost as light as day."

"But we must do something. A woman at the mercy of those——"

"She is safe. Bernardo Salgun is a wicked man, but he will not allow a woman to be harmed. And he is now their leader."

"Then why did they take her?"

"Because it is possible that José might decide to reveal his secret to her. His volcano gods are very undependable, you know. Perhaps they suspect that he has already done so and that you and she

have merely been waiting for them to leave before you go and dig up the gold. Their next move will be to try to get him into their power again, and then they will hold all the cards. To-morrow we must move him to a safe hiding place."

This reasoning sounded logical, but it did not entirely satisfy Parnell. He did not share Tula's faith in the chivalry of Salgun. Besides, he dimly suspected that there was something hostile in her attitude toward the American girl. She had dropped several remarks that would indicate at least a mild dislike.

Remembering how Jessica had protested against being left alone that afternoon, Lou blamed himself bitterly. Under the circumstances he could not have sat still and let Tula carry on the search for José. Miss Frayne could not have been taken along without greatly hampering and delaying the expedition; but he might at least have told her to remain in close hiding.

His sleep, when he finally dozed off, was fitful. Again he found himself wide awake. He struck a match and his watch told him that it was just past one o'clock. The illumination from the volcano had almost entirely died away. There was no light save from the stars that shone through the scattered clouds.

"I'm going to do something," he resolved. "Look around that castle, anyway. Those fellows did a lot of walking yesterday, and maybe I can catch them deep in the sleep of the unjust."

Making as little noise as possible, he saddled a horse and stole away. His rifle he left behind, taking only his revolver. Half a mile or so from the caves he hitched the animal to a bush. From there he walked ahead cautiously until he reached the edge of the swale of which Tula had spoken.

Alvarado had indeed chosen his stronghold well. In front was the sandy draw, more than a hundred yards across and offering no cover except a few chollas and prickly pears. About the entrance to the main cavern were numerous boulders from behind which a dozen riflemen could hold off a regiment. Above was a lofty, unbroken cliff.

"It looks as though there's not a thing to keep me from strolling in and making myself at home," Parnell ruminated. "Too risky, though. Let's see!"

Finally he worked out a plan. He went well up the swale, out of rifle range, and wormed his way across to a narrow gully with steep banks, five or six feet high, some ten yards out from the cliff. He had first meant to proceed down this but found it entirely too straight and lacking in cover. So he crawled across it and inched along among the scattered rocks right at the base of the precipice. Ahead was a detached boulder, big as a bungalow, that he hoped might be scaled. If he could gain the top he was sure that he could glimpse the cave's interior.

"Getting to be a regular Indian," he exulted. "Bet Pablo couldn't do a neater job of stalking. Five seconds more——"

"Manos arribas! Drop the gun."

The words crackled through the still air like a pistol shot.

Parnell obeyed both commands. His fingers pointed toward the stars. Salgun stepped from behind the big boulder with his Winchester pointed straight at the American's breast.

"Move back, please. That's enough."

Salgun picked up Lou's automatic. "A thousand thanks," he said suavely. "I have sadly needed such a weapon since you were so thoughtless as to deprive me of my own. Now the tables are turned, eh?

"You thought to catch Bernardo Salgun napping? But I knew that you would come. This way, for there is no other to approach the castle. Still, I must admit my disappointment that the young lady for whose favor we are rivals did not accompany you."

Parnell could not repress a startled exclamation.

"You are surprised that I know? Have you forgotten the neat little boot tracks that she left about the camp of the Señorita Frayne? Ah, you are just a—what is it you gringos say? A tenderfoot. Yes, a tenderfoot in Mexico. It was a very unfortunate day for you when you decided to visit Sonora."

"But she will follow you here and then there will be a final reckoning. It is strange how she seeks you out, señor. But nothing except a girlish fancy that will soon pass when——"

"Your pardon, señor. You may lower your arms now. I have something for you."

Salgun snapped a pair of handcuffs around Lou's wrists.

"Now, do me the kindness to lead the way to your horse."

Inwardly raging at himself, Parnell trudged ahead of his captor. He took the shortest route to the place where he had left the pony hitched. The Mexican mounted, and Lou was herded ingloriously into the cave.

In the gloom he could make out two huddled forms on the boor. Green and Hendricks were snoring raucously.

"Dogs!" sneered Salgun as he picked up a heavy chain. This he passed between the captive's arms, and then padlocked the two ends to one of the heavy rings in the wall.

"I am sorry that I have no more comfortable quarters to offer you, señor; but our guest chamber, behind that iron door, is occupied. Now you will pardon me while I take care of the horse."

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE MOUNTAIN STRONGHOLD.

BLEARY-EYED, dirty, unshaven and morose, Green and Hendricks rolled out just as the rising sun crowned the gaunt hills with gold. Their ill humor turned to delight when they saw Parnell securely tied up well within the entrance of the cave.

"Well!" crowed Green. "The prohibition kid. Where'd you get it, Sally? Or did a wild cat drag it in?"

Salgun vouchsafed no reply save one of his expansive, self-satisfied smiles that displayed many teeth. He absently rolled a cigarette and squinted out into the sunlight.

"Let me have first poke at 'im, will you?" begged Hendricks. "It'll do my heart good to ruin that baby face. He's the bird that dealt us all this misery. If it hadn't been for him buttin' in we'd be down at the beach now, sittin' on a chest of gold and waitin' for our ship."

"Yeah, and it's just about due back from the head of the gulf," chimed in Green. "Cost us a hundred bones for every day that old skipper has to wait for us."

"I would advise you not to become impatient, gentlemen," yawned Salgun. "Do you not see that my program is working out beautifully? The escape of the medicine man was only a temporary setback. We have plenty of provisions, such as they are; and surely, after yesterday, you will be glad of a little rest."

"We do need it," Green admitted. "My dogs are two solid blisters. But it's goin' to be kind of monotonous, settin' here in a danged gopher hole without a drop of anything to drink nor no other way to pass the time."

"I thought of that, and intend to do everything possible to make your stay pleasant. We have no distilleries or wineries here in the desert, but if one knows how it is easy to manufacture certain substitutes that will do in a pinch for more civilized liquors."

"But that takes a deuce of a long time."

"Not so long. Do you see that *olla?* Last night I filled it with water and the pulp of *saguaro* fruit. As soon as it starts to ferment it is at least drinkable."

The Americans peered interestedly into the jar. "Not a bubble yet," Green reported.

"Perhaps it would hasten matters to set it out in the sun."

This suggestion was followed. While Green and Hendricks laid wagers as to how long it would take the beer to accumulate a "kick," Salgun kindled a fire among some blackened stones. He stepped out for a moment, probably to another cave, and returned with a load of tin dishes and cooking utensils. He fried bacon, boiled coffee, and heated three or four cans of baked beans.

After the three of them had eaten, Salgun silently set a plateful of beans and crackers and a mug of coffee before Parnell. Lou ate slowly. His request for a second helping of coffee was granted readily.

"Hey, Sally, what's the idea of treatin' that jasper like the duke's grandfather?" criticized Green. "Why not crack him one good one over the coco and throw him to the coyotes. That's what I'd do to a sneak that tried to glom my frail."

"A live man is better than a dead one for trading purposes," Salgun explained. "And the Areneños think much of this gringo."

"Maybe you're right. Have to hand it to you for gettin' better results than we could, anyway. But we'll have to keep our eyes on him, 'cause he's as treacherous as twin rattlesnakes."

With another plate and mug, Salgun started back to the sheet-iron door.

"Hey, lemme out of here if you're going to feed that precious cousin of mine," said Hendricks. "I don't want any more tongue-lashings from her. What I'm worried about is what we're going to do with her, now that we've got her. Can't even let her get back to San Francisco, that's a cinch."

"That need not worry *you*," laughed Salgun with an implication that Parnell did not fathom until several hours later.

Hendricks left the cave. Salgun opened the door. Through the half-light Parnell could just see the form of Jessica Frayne in the opening. He crouched farther back against the wall; it would not comfort her any to know that he was also a captive.

"Oh, please take me out of this dreadful place," she pleaded. "It's so dark, like a dungeon. I'll go mad.

"Where's Howard Hendricks? Where's Mr. Parnell? Go to him and to José and tell them that I resign all my claim to the gold."

"That would do no good. José is guided by whatever his gods tell him, not by you."

Salgun pushed her back, set down the fool, and snapped the padlock.

CHAPTER XVI.

AS PLANNED BY SALGUN.

A HOT, miserable, sultry morning dragged its way toward noon. The patch of sky visible to Parnell was half the time obscured by drifting, fleecy clouds. Distant thunder rumbled, and once he heard the pattering raindrops of a light shower.

Green and Hendricks found a deck of cards and began a contentious game of poker in which Salgun declined to join. For comfort they removed their revolvers and lay them on the floor, close at hand.

Their luck seesawed. They were betting fabulous quantities of gold, accounts to be settled when José gave up Captain Frayne's treasure. Their arguments and accusations of cheating became so acrimonious that Parnell would not have been surprised to see a gun fight start at any moment.

Eventually it was discovered that the cactus beer was foaming over the lip of the olla. With wild whoops the gamblers leaped to sample it.

"Tastes like shoe polish," Green criticized, smirking at Parnell and casting

the dregs of his cup in the prisoner's direction. "But it's got the bite and that's what counts. Better try some, Sally."

"No, thanks. I am not drinking to-day."

Salgun had moved across the cave and appeared to be idly shuffling the greasy cards.

Poker was forgotten while enormous quantities of the liquor were swilled down. It could have contained no high percentage of alcohol but the drinkers consumed so much that they were soon unsteady.

"Now if we only had a crowd of nice, lively girls," cackled Hendricks. "That'd make things real pleasant around here. Say, Parnell, what became of those two little brown flappers?"

"What's the matter with bringin' out your blond cousin?" proposed Green. "Not a bad looker, and maybe she wouldn't have such a mean disposition if she had a couple of jolts of this joy juice under her belt."

"Not Jessie. No good on a party. Won't take a drop. Regular killjoy," he answered.

A further veto was given this idea by a vigorous negative from Salgun.

The asinine, bibulous conversation ran on until the Mexican arose and craned his neck. His companions joined him.

"See sumpin', Sally?"

"Three women. Or is it four? Walking."

"By golly! And that other squaw, with her kid."

The two toughs grinned evilly at each other, and winked. "Not a thing to stop us," said Green.

"Stop you from what?" asked Salgun.

"Oh, me and Hendricks, we're figurin' to lay for 'em and see if they don't make pleasant company. Feller's got to have some female society. Better come along."

"No!" Salgun refused emphatically. "My advice is that you let Indian women alone. You will only——"

He stopped abruptly and spent a long minute in deep thought. Then he went on:

"After all, why not?"

"Good old Sally! Come on. They're out of sight for a minute now, beyond them trees. Gives us a chance to hide in the gully till they come along. Headed straight this way."

"No; I would rather stay here and watch the fun. Take the girls, and the old one will run away with the boy."

"Just as you say. Here goes!"

Green and Hendricks hurriedly buckled on their revolvers and plunged down into the gully. Chuckling to himself, Salgun came back to Parnell.

"And you too shall see the fun," he said. "Just that you may see how the well-laid plans of Bernardo Salgun work out."

He unfastened Lou's chain and ran it through another of the rings, right at the mouth of the cave. From this new position the captive could see Green and Hendricks, crouched like vicious animals under the far bank of the gulch. The sky was now completely overcast by blue-black clouds and a drizzling rain had begun to fall.

Not a hundred yards away were Juana, Chona, and Rita, in billowing calico dresses of green and red, striding gracefully along with huge willow baskets balanced upon their heads. At his mother's heels trotted little Viapo. The Areneños women were on their way home, doubtless with their baskets full of *saguaro* fruit and other foods. They had been banished from Hotunikat to remove them from the danger zone, but now——

Parnell opened his mouth to shriek a warning but Salgun pressed a hand over his lips.

"Quiet, señor. Do not spoil my little joke. Your friends are in no danger. Do you think our tipsy gringos can over-

power those girls? Did you ever see an Areneño woman when she was really angry?"

"But those rats have guns."

"Yes?" Salgun laughed again as he held out a palm full of shiny cartridges. "I have pulled the fangs of our coyotes. But if you warn the squaws they will run and may not have time to reach safety before the *perros* have time to reload. At close quarters—ah!"

The women had reached a point directly opposite the cave. Green and Hendricks jumped out of concealment and threw their arms around Rita and Chona. The girl's baskets went rolling off, spilling the fruit.

Not one single scream did the squaws emit. Taken wholly by surprise, they wasted no time nor breath in futile yelling, but settled themselves to the business of repelling their assailants.

Nor did Juana fulfill Salgun's prediction and flee with Viapo. She deliberately set down her basket and surveyed the turmoil taking place on the edge of the gully.

Almost at the same instant the two pair of wrestlers crashed over the bank and continued their separate struggles among the wet gravel and slippery stones at the bottom. Juana took a flying leap and Viapo landed by her side, his little black shirt tail flapping ridiculously about his untroused legs.

Unsteady from drink, and surprised by the vigor of the resistance they met, Green and Hendricks fared badly from the start. They strove desperately to get at their revolvers but never did learn of that feature of Salgun's grim "joke." The girls adopted the same tactics; each fastened strong, sharp teeth over a right wrist and bit until the blood came.

"Pull 'er off, Sally," implored Hendricks. "Chase her away. Ye-e-e-e-ow!'

Salgun laughed merrily and slapped his thigh.

Juana picked up a smooth, water-worn boulder and with an accuracy that any baseball pitcher might have envied, heaved it at Hendricks' head. Parnell heard a sharp crack, almost simultaneous with a clap of thunder. Hendricks keeled over on one side, completely out.

Next, Juana turned to Green. He had probably observed what happened to his confederate, and by a quick lunge he dodged her throw. At the same time he fought furiously to free himself from Chona.

When Hendricks went limp, Rita also sprang to Chona's aid. Hendricks struggled to rise, but Viapo was on him like a brown wild cat. With a chunk of wood snatched from somewhere, the child pounded the prostrate man with all his strength until Hendricks' face was nothing but a mass of bloody horror.

The three women had little trouble in besting Green. In no time at all they were sitting astride him.

Satisfied with his work on Hendricks, Viapo dashed to the other fight with a screech of triumph. He smashed his club down on Green's skull, and Green also went to sleep.

From up the gulch came a dull roar. The squaws suddenly found their feet covered by a brownish flood. Realizing that a swift desert freshet was coming, the result of a shower somewhere above, they scrambled up the nearest bank.

That happened to be the east bank. They were within ten feet of the mouth of the cave before they saw Salgun and Parnell.

Salgun had his rifle in his hand. He leveled it at the Indians and motioned them to step within.

The squaws gaped stupidly. "Inside!" the Mexican repeated.

Still the Areneño women stood moveless. Viapo glared defiantly.

Salgun pulled the trigger. The bullet burned Juana's cheek and clipped off several coarse black hairs.

"Obey him," said Parnell in Areneño, convinced that Salgun was ready to commit murder to enforce his order.

They trooped fearfully into the cave. Parnell glanced toward the gully, now a muddy torrent. There was no sign of Green or Hendricks. Their battered, sodden, lifeless bodies, Lou knew, must be a mile downstream by this time.

"And did it all work out according to your plan?" he asked.

"Well enough. Of course I did not foresee the flood, nor did I intend for the swine to die just yet. But you will agree that they deserved all they got, and I can manage very nicely without their help.

"Was it not an amusing joke, señor?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEDICINE DRUM.

NAUSEATED by the tragedy that he had witnessed, and yet relieved that the force of the enemy had been reduced two-thirds in number, Parnell watched Salgun unlock the dungeon door. Again Jessica Frayne, crying incoherent entreaties, tried to run by him; but he flung her back with an oath and herded the Areneños into the blackness.

Salgun sat down with a stub of a pencil and a piece of paper torn from a bag, and set about composing a note. Lou tried to fathom what was in the fellow's mind. What was this ruthless, debonair, confident outlaw planning?

"At that, he's almost likable at times," the Yankee pondered. "A regular prince, compared with Green and Hendricks. But I know just what to expect from him as soon as he's through with me. He means to use me in some way to get his hands on the gold, and perhaps to bring Tula within his reach, and then—— Well, all I can do is to use my wits and try to delay his game. I wonder what Tula's doing."

Salgun finished his note at last. Once more he opened the iron door. Chona was first out, then he slammed it shut.

"Take this to Señorita Tula," he directed, handing her the letter.

Chona, understanding neither English nor Spanish, hesitated. Parnell, reasoning that it would be a distinct advantage to have his friends at Hotunikat know the exact situation at the cave, translated the order into Areneño and added quickly:

"Tell José not to give up the gold and tell Tula not to come near this place."

"Silence!" roared Salgun, hustling the Indian girl along toward the entrance.

Chona pulled back and said over her shoulder to Parnell:

"José will pray to the gods of the mountain and they will free you."

With this, Chona ran down the slope and across the gulch wherein the flood had subsided as quickly as it came.

"It makes no difference what word you send to them," Salgun remarked. "All the cards are in my hands."

It was half impulse, half inspiration, that caused Parnell to throw back his head and laugh with a heartiness that almost deceived himself.

"All the cards are in your hands?" he derided. "You forget the gods of Smoking Mountain."

"Gods? Old José's heathen gods? Do you believe in them?"

"Do I believe in them? Señor Salgun, if you had lived with the Areneños as I have, and seen the things that I have seen, you would not doubt. You would know—you would know——"

Parnell groped for words as his imagination faltered. Then his eyes lighted on the triangular red burn under Salgun's left ear, dating back to the day that an eruption had changed José's mind about delivering the treasure to the bringers of the bronze god.

"You would know that since the mountain has placed its mark upon you, it will eventually claim you for its own. There is no escape.

"No doubt you think that since you have those two Indian women and the child in your clutches, you can frighten José and Pablo into doing whatever you

wish. But they cannot be frightened. They do nothing without consulting the gods, and they know that the gods are on their side."

"Fool! Still that clattering tongue."

"Salgun's hand went to the burned spot under his ear, now almost healed. He got up and strode uneasily about while Parnell recounted numerous imaginary instances wherein the gods had heeded the supplications of the medicine man and shown their power. As he suspected, there was a streak of superstition in the Mexican's makeup.

"You will soon see some manifestation that will convince you," Lou predicted and started a gay army song. Salgun again bade him be quiet and threatened him with the rifle.

Scarcely another word passed between jailer and prisoner the rest of the afternoon. Salgun moodily kept the fire going under the bean pot. When the sinking sun was shooting its rays into the cave he ate lightly and then fed Parnell, who feigned a prodigious appetite. He then passed the whole *olla* of beans, and another of water, in to the women.

"Listen!" said Lou, poising his spoon.

Over the desert wastes reverberated a round, rhythmic boom.

"It's José, making an invocation to the gods. Before long we shall see what we shall see."

"Shut up!" rasped Salgun.

The beans in the plate that Lou held were spilled out on the floor. His body swayed, and the back of his head cracked smartly against the wall. A loud and prolonged detonation drowned out the medicine drum.

Smoking Mountain had erupted again.

Salgun, who had been walking across the cave, staggered drunkenly. A piece of stone, loosened from the roof, struck him between the shoulders and sent him sprawling on his face. In a moment he was up, with his revolver aimed at Lou and his lips parted in an ugly snarl.

Parnell faced death with a smile of confidence and even of defiance. After a moment, Salgun thrust the weapon back into its holster.

The drum continued its booming.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRENGTH OF THE GODS.

THE next day passed with maddening slowness. No further showers came to allay the torrid heat, and the volcano was not heard from again. Salgun regained his shaken poise and once more grinned tauntingly at Parnell.

"Yes the Areneños will bring me the gold," he predicted airily. "What else can they do Their squaws are at my mercy."

"You are not dealing with white men," Lou reminded him. "You are dealing with Indians—and Indian gods. They will defeat you in the end."

"Bernardo Salgun always wins."

"In love?"

The bandit's face was immediately overcast by a black scowl. "Yes, in love," he spat. "You shall see—just before you die."

Throughout the day Salgun sat in his accustomed place near the cave's mouth, feet propped on a block of granite, smoking cigarettes. In the late afternoon he leaped up, looked out and announced gayly:

"He's coming."

"Who?"

"The Indian, Pablo. Leading two pack horses. What did I tell you, gringo? Who wins now?"

Salgun hummed *"Ojos Verdes"* and twisted himself another cigarette. Then he went outside. Not believing yet that the Areneños had surrendered to the Mexican's demand, Parnell strained his ears.

Salgun shouted as he poked the muzzle of his rifle over a boulder. "Far enough. Stop where you are. Have you brought the gold?"

Lou could not hear the reply, but evidently it was in the affirmative.

"All of it? Don't try to cheat me. I know how much there should be. Just a little less than three hundred pounds."

Again there came an indistinct answer.

"Very well. Bring your bags up here and you shall have your women."

"No, I will not release your *amigo*. That is not in the bargain. The white woman, but not the gringo. I still have use for him. Step on up here if you want to save your squaw and your *muchacho*."

Displaced pebbles rattled as Pablo toiled up the slope with a small but heavy canvas bag of gold dust. The Indian's careworn face came within Parnell's restricted line of vision. He anxiously peered into the darkness of the cave but could see nothing.

Three more bags were brought up to the entrance by Pablo. "That is all," he said.

Salgun hefted the gold eagerly. He untied the drawstrings and drew forth handfuls of gleaming nuggets that he handled lovingly. His face was alight with the pure joy of handling raw gold.

Parnell called out a greeting in Areneño. "Speak Spanish or nothing," Salgun warned.

"Why did you give up the gold?" Lou then asked in Castilian.

"The gods of the mountain told José to do it."

"Surely they did not tell him that it belongs to this man."

"No; they have at last told him that it belongs to the girl with the yellow hair. But anybody else who tries to claim it will be punished. The white men from the ship have already died, and——"

"Bah!" interrupted Salgun. "Enough of that chatter. Stand where you are. And when you go, leave one of those horses tied to a bush. Understand?"

He strode to the iron door and threw it open. Little Viapo was first to dart out and fly to the arms of his father, emitting squeals of delight.

Rita and Juana emerged, supporting Jessica Frayne between them. Her features were but a grayish blot in the gloom, and she was moaning softly.

"Courage!" called Parnell. "Things will be coming our way now. Listen to José and believe him, for what he will tell you about the gods will be truth."

Apparently she did not hear him. The squaws dragged her out into the open air. The sound of her moaning died away.

"Come back here a minute, *indio*" Salgun directed. "I have another note for the Señorita Alvarado."

Pablo pocketed the paper that was handed him.

"And when she receives that——" Salgun winked portentously at Parnell. "We shall see. We shall see."

"When the gods of the volcano——"

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The eerie, creepy thump of José's drum floated through the sunset glow. It came from somewhere near at hand; not more than a mile away Lou judged.

"You hear that?" Parnell's laugh was confident and joyous.

"José has moved down here on the ground and is invoking the gods of the mountain to destroy you. Have you ever observed the work of the Smoking Mountain gods when they are really angry, señor? Areneños women are gentle, compared with them."

"Fool! If you are depending on spirits from a volcano to save you——"

Thus voicing Parnell's own secret opinion, Salgun flung himself out. Lou could hear him leading the new horse into the stable cave. The American wondered how far he could tantalize his guardian without provoking him to the point of physical retaliation; likewise he wondered what threat might be in that letter to Tula.

When Salgun came back the drum

was booming more loudly and insistently than before. Parnell fancied that at times he could even hear the high-pitched chant of the medicine man. He smiled, and though his throat tightened he sang snatches from jazz songs.

Salgun was about to light a remnant of candle but paused and let the match die while he faced about to stare beyond the portal. For the gathering night was permeated by a weird, pinkish, flickering radiation that illuminated even the farthest reaches of the cave.

A roar as of a million battles filled the air. The whole mountain seemed to tilt and sway, as though Atlas had dropped the world and run off about some other business. Parnell was thrown out toward the center of the cave as far as his chains would reach and until his arm bones were nigh jerked from their sockets; then he was hurled back against the wall with a violence that pounded the breath from his body.

Walls, roof and floor cracked like pistol shots. Fine dust and great chunks of sandstone rattled down. As the rumble of the eruption died away and settled to a more or less steady swell of confused sound, the rock continued to groan.

Parnell closed his eyes tight, tried to shut out the dust from his lungs. Another half minute of that choking atmosphere and he must smother. Shackled as he was his plight was far more terrifying than on either of the two occasions when he so narrowly escaped asphyxiation by volcano smoke.

In an agony of fear he wrenched at his bonds. The clumsy iron screw bolt to which he had been fastened for two days and nights pulled out of the stone with no effort whatever.

Doubtless one of the numerous cracks had come at just the right place to loosen the bolt from its anchorage. Parnell, however, did not stop to investigate. He knew only, cared only, that he was free; blindly he staggered toward the wavering crimson light of the open air.

Thankfully he gulped deep drafts of the desert ozone. He winked his eyes hard to force the tears to come and wash away the stinging sand particles. Oddly enough, for a moment his only thought was that if he could clear his vision he could behold the spectacle of a volcano in eruption.

The clanking of the chains reminded him, however, that he was still partially a prisoner. Salgun? Where was he?

"Why, he must still be in there, dead or unconscious. All I have to do is to walk away, get away from this mountain. But—no! Not wearing a pair of handcuffs, a log chain and an iron bar. And the gold! By Jove, I had forgotten that. José's gods have got busy in earnest. They're fighting on my side now."

The dusk had partially settled in the murky interior. Parnell went inside cautiously. He stopped to listen, but all sound was merged into the roar of the volcano.

Being without matches Lou dropped to his hands and knees and groped among the débris. He tried to steer toward the spot where he had last seen Salgun, and was soon rewarded by touching an inert human leg.

He ran his fingers swiftly up to the Mexican's waistline and found his revolver holster empty; probably the weapon had been shaken out when Salgun fell. Lou continued his explorations to the head and found the hair soaked with blood. In the almost complete blackness he could not tell whether Salgun still breathed.

"First thing is to rid myself of these impediments," Parnell decided. "Then—shall I try to save him? He deserves no consideration from me, of all people; and yet he's human and helpless and I——"

All this time he was digging into Salgun's pockets. He drew forth a small bunch of keys and tried them in turn until one unlocked the handcuffs. He flung the gyves as far as he could throw

them, put his hands under the Mexican's arms, and dragged away.

Before he was well outside he felt something gouge into his back. Dropping his burden, he wheeled to face two sombreroed Mexicans who had him covered.

One he recognized as the youngster who had brought to Hotunikat the summons for Alvarado to lead the revolutionists at Hermosillo. The other he had never seen.

"What does all this mean, gringo?" The volcano's sullen growl had died away until Lou could barely catch the words.

Parnell waited a long minute, collecting his scattered wits, before replying. These fellows must have just returned from Hermosillo, ignorant of all that had transpired in their absence.

They could know little or nothing of the circumstances surrounding Tula's desertion and Salgun's return; certainly they could know nothing of his being Salgun's prisoner. Obviously, the thing for the American to do was to put a bold face on it.

"We were in the cave when the earthquake came. He is hurt, as you can see. I think a falling rock hit him on the head."

"Of course! And we thought that there had been a fight, that you had shot him."

"Idiot! Would I be carrying him out here if I had shot him?"

"True! Ah, his heart still beats. But that looks like a bad wound in his scalp. Where is the Señorita Tula?"

"At Hotunikat."

"Go for her at once, gringo. Tell her that her betrothed is sorely wounded. Don't stand there gawping like a sick burro. Go!"

Salgun stirred. His jaw worked spasmodically and a labored squawk worked its way past his teeth.

Only Parnell understood that he was struggling on the border of consciousness to say the Spanish equivalent of "Stop him."

Lou waited no longer. Not daring to take the time to get one of the horses from the stable cave, he plunged down the hillside, across the arroyo, and on into the scrub beyond the swale.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CLIMAX OF CALAMITY.

LOU PARNELL did not take the route to Hotunikat, for he feared that he would be followed as soon as Salgun became able to give an intelligible order. He swung westward until he was almost down to the sand dunes, then pressed northward.

His one idea was to get his hands on his rifle; beyond that he had no certain plan; he must talk over the situation with Tula, get her advice. But he had by no means given up hopes of recovering Jessica Frayne's heritage. He was more determined than ever that Salgun should not hold it.

"I'm not going to quit," he resolved. "In the first place I started out to see that Green and Hendricks didn't get it, and the only difference now is that I have a fresh set of villains to deal with. But there won't be any more holding back if I ever get another chance at Bernardo.

"Still, I guess it's pretty lucky that I didn't 'obey that impulse' and give him a bullet between the eyes a little while back. If I had, those other birds would have walked in and plugged me without taking the trouble to ask questions."

He stopped only once; that was at a pool in an arroyo where he drank deeply and scrubbed some of the grime from his haggard face. As he traveled he looked often toward Smoking Mountain, now smoking indeed and pouring a thin ribbon of lava down its western slope. Most of the smoke was being blown inland by a strong breeze that had set in from the Gulf.

Gradually the lava lost its fiery glow, either from rapid cooling or because it was outshone by the splendid full moon now riding high in the sky. Somehow Lou was disappointed by the sight; he had probably missed the best part of the volcano's "show."

His arrival at Hotunikat was heralded by a welcoming bray from Jenny, his burro, browsing on bushes near the camp. A few dark forms scurried into the huts.

"It is I," he shouted. "Pablo, where are you?"

The Areneño came running to shake his hand and grunt out his thankfulness. The squaws crowded around him and José resumed his seat on the medicine drum in the middle of the village street, from which he raptly contemplated the home of his gods.

"Where is Tula? Where is Miss Frayne?"

"The white woman is lying down, sick from fright. Did you not see Tula when she got Salgun to release you?"

"When she got Salgun to release me? What are you talking about, Pablo? I escaped, with the help of José's gods."

"Tula left for the castle as soon as I brought his note. The Mexican wrote that he was going to torture you to death to-night unless she promised to marry him as soon as possible. She said that there was no other way that you could be saved."

Lou's head swam. Here was a wholly unforeseen and staggering turn of affairs. By taking a circuitous course he had missed her when she was hurrying to rescue him at the cost of her own liberty. The best that she could hope for, except in the improbable event of her escape, was a life of misery as the wife of Salgun, whom she hated.

Briefly he recited the circumstances of his own deliverance.

"I told her that the gods would take care of you," José cackled wisely. "But she would not listen."

"Bring me my rifle and cartridges, Pablo. And Rosita."

"What are you going to do, white friend?"

"Kill Salgun, if I die for it the next minute. The time for half-hearted measures is certainly past now."

As Pablo trotted off, Juana beckoned Lou into a hut. "The pale woman would speak with you."

The lodge was dimly lighted from a rag swimming in a cup of bear grease. Jessica Frayne lay on a pallet of skins. Her arms, revealed through tears in her tattered dress, were no longer firm and round, but shriveled and wasted. Her features were wraithlike; he met her wide, imploring eyes wherein terror still lurked.

"Oh I'm so glad you're free!" she sighed weakly. "Take me away. Take me away, please."

"I can't, Miss Frayne. Soon, perhaps, but not yet."

"Let that terrible man have my uncle's gold. Don't endanger your life for it again. I don't want it. I don't want it. I only want to get far, far away from this country, before that mountain destroys us all.

"Oh, you don't know what I went through in that stone dungeon. And Pablo says that my Cocopahs have fled in terror of the volcano. Oh, don't think of trying to get back that gold."

"It isn't just the gold," he returned, gently but firmly. "That is a very secondary matter now. Salgun has Tula in his clutches, just as he had you until this afternoon. Only she is in far more danger than you ever were because he is in love with her."

"Danger? To her? Why—why—you must be somehow mistaken. She told me once that she was engaged to him, and I've been wondering——"

"I haven't time to explain now, Miss Frayne. Pablo is bringing his horse for me. Keep your spirits up."

Parnell strapped his cartridge belt

around his waist, took the carbine from Pablo and made sure that the breech mechanism was working smoothly. With a final "Good-by!" he mounted and galloped away toward the "castle" that had so recently been his prison.

On looking backward he was astonished to see that Pablo was loping along at Rosita's heels, carrying his long ironwood bow and a quiver of arrows over his shoulder.

"What do you think you're going to do?" he demanded.

"I am going to help you kill Salgun."

"But I must hurry, and you can't keep up with a horse on foot."

"I can keep up. Areneños and Papagos often run twenty leagues in a day. Don't wait for me."

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ululation of the drum was accompanied by a falsetto appeal to the gods of Smoking Mountain that they wreak dire vengeance on the Mexican outlaw and free the olive-skinned Tula as they had already freed the Americano ally of the red men.

"Perhaps there will be nothing for us to do when we get to the caves," Pablo suggested hopefully.

CHAPTER XX.

HOT PURSUIT.

THERE was no light in the cavern. The brilliant moonbeams disclosed no movement about the mountain retreat that Firmin Alvarado had named *El Castillo*. A whitish bird swooped through the still night and chose an observation post on the cliff above.

"They are already gone," said Pablo.

"Are you sure?"

"If any one was there, that owl would not perch so near. And I would hear the horses in the other cave."

"Do you think that we can trail them in the moonlight?"

"I know the trail they will take until they reach the open mesa around on the east side. After that they may go any way."

"Let's be after them, then."

The Indian led the way across the swale. Parnell was not greatly surprised that Salgun was already hurrying away from Smoking Mountain with the gold and Tula. He had already reached the conclusion that his enemy had not been severely injured when part of the roof fell on his head.

A moment's cursory examination proved that the caves were indeed unoccupied. Parnell did not dismount while Pablo dived inside.

While he waited, a streak of fire shot high out of the crater and exploded in the sky like a Brobdingnagian Roman candle. For a split second the country for miles about was lighter than day.

The earth trembled again, not very violently but enough to set Rosita to leaping and plunging. Parnell would have been incontinently bucked off had not Pablo come running to seize her bridle and speak soothing words.

"Horses do not like it when the gods of the mountain shake the world," remarked the Areneño. "I hoped that the Cocopah ponies would break away when the big shake came to-day, but they must have been too strongly tied."

"Now that I remember it, I think I heard them squealing and snorting," Lou replied. "I don't know that I blame them for being scared."

Pablo padded along a scarcely discernible path that led southward, then southeast through tangled hills and "bad lands" and across innumerable small arroyos. Parnell pushed Rosita as fast as he dared, considering the many chances she had to slip and break a leg in badger dens, rabbit warrens, and pot holes, yet the tireless Indian ever kept just a little ahead of him.

Mile after mile they covered. Lou began to realize that Smoking Mountain was much larger than he had previously suspected, for on this side it was more

spread out and its face was considerably less abrupt than to the west. As the moon paled and the first flush of dawn reddened the eastern sky, he was able to make out numerous banks of slag rising tier on tier toward the summit. Each tier, he guessed, represented an active period in the volcano's intermittent life. Here and there a streak of grayish smoke marked the course of a lava stream not yet cool. Some of these streams reached down to the desert itself.

"I guess we didn't see anything last night," he remarked to Pablo. "Around here is where the old fire box spills itself and puts on a real performance."

Pablo did not answer. He had halted suddenly on the brink of a yawning abyss all of twenty feet wide and twice as deep—a mighty fissure cutting squarely across the trail.

"Eh? What's this?"

"It is a trench dug by the gods to keep the Mexicans from escaping us." There was a ring of triumph and exultation in the Indian's voice.

"You mean that it was made by the earthquake last night? True enough; but I don't see how it's going to help us any."

"They are hunting for a way across, and losing time. See? Their tracks show that they first went to the left, then came back."

Pablo veered to the right, trotting swiftly and confidently along the edge of the newly made fissure. Several hundred yards below the trail he stopped again. There was a break in the wall, with hoofprints leading down to the uneven bed of the crack.

"Here they lost more time, persuading their horses to go down," said Pablo. "But Rosita is gentle."

Parnell slid off while Pablo led the mare to the bottom. They floundered along for a quarter of an hour, through soft dust and gravel and boulders that were sprinkled with drab volcanic ash, until the tracks angled up the other side. Less than an eighth of a mile farther on they came to still another gully, almost as large, and the wearisome process of getting across had to be repeated all over again. Parnell, indescribably tired and with the stinging sweat rolling into his eyes, was becoming pessimistic.

Pablo's confidence, however, steadily grew. "We'll catch up with them any time now," he predicted.

Lou's heart was pounding from the prolonged exertion of dragging himself and his carbine. He wondered if he would be able to hold a bead on Salgun. Fatigue but deepened his determination to shoot on sight, as he would shoot any other predatory animal; to have done with this dreary struggle against fate's whims and man's perfidy.

"I'll probably get mine before this racket's over," he reflected dully. "But that's all right, if first I can drill a hole through that beast and give Tula her chance to escape. Damn the gold! Damn life!"

The sun was above the horizon now a circle of molten brass. They had crossed three large fissures, besides a hundred smaller ones, and in so doing had worked farther in toward the mountain from which the cracks radiated. When they approached a fourth, Rosita reared into the air and backed away, nostrils spread and flanks heaving.

Lou advanced to the lip of the gorge and beheld a hissing, red-gray, sluggish stream three or four yards in width, from which heat and a thin smoke arose in scorching, rearing waves.

"Live lava," he reported. "That's one reason why it's so hot around here this morning."

"They crossed here," stated Pablo. "The crawling fire has come since. Now we must get ahead of it and pick up their trail again."

A quarter of a mile or so down they passed the head of the lava river, creeping along like some reptile from hell

seeking mundane life to destroy. But they had to go even farther, and circle a rather large knoll, before they found a way down into the chasm. Luckily, however, it was only a few steps to an outlet.

"Wait!" hissed Pablo when they were almost to the top.

Parnell could hear nothing save the pumping of his overtaxed heart. He crept on past the Indian until he could peer out over a fairly level stretch of ground sparsely covered with undersized sage bushes.

Salgun and his party had stopped about two hundred yards away and well to the left of the pursuers, held up by another fissure. Each of the two men who had returned the night before from Hermosillo was leading a pack horse. Salgun himself held the reins of Tula's big gray gelding, Chapo.

"Her hands are bound to the saddle," whispered Pablo.

"That settles it, then."

Parnell adjusted the sights of his rifle to allow for the faint breeze. He poked the muzzle over the rim.

"No time for buck ague now," he was telling himself as he lined up the bead with the lower point of Salgun's left shoulder blade.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE PATH OF THE LAVA.

AT that moment, Smoking Mountain loosed all its pent-up fury in one convulsive paroxysm that instantaneously filled the heavens above its cone with a stygian pall shot through with coruscations of crimson flame. Parnell's rifle barrel swung like a crazy pendulum for a moment, then he and Pablo were hurled backward and tossed about like ants in choking dust at the bottom of the ravine. Boulders and great lumps of earth came crashing down after them. With a scream that was almost human, Rosita tore off down the crevasse.

Parnell tried to speak to Pablo but could not even hear the sound of his own voice. He was momentarily deafened by the explosion.

Glowing cinders and flakes of ash peppered down. Lou found the back of his shirt on fire and beat out the blaze with his open hand.

Tula? What had happened to her?

The thought sent him scrambling back up the bank.

Through the shower of volcanic débris he could see a confused knot of plunging horses.

One broke away from the rest. It was a gray—Chapo!

On swept the terrified gelding, headed straight for the chasm from which Lou Parnell watched in frozen horror. The reins were switching about his front legs.

"My Heaven! She's tied on!"

Chapo, Lou saw, was due to strike the fissure about two hundred feet to his left. When he catapulted over the edge at that speed——

He dropped his gun and ran. He knew that he could not possibly head off the runaway, nor stop him if he did. Yet he ran and ran. Something within him lent wings to his feet.

In Chapo's wake streaked another horse, smaller but under the control of a skillful rider and urged on by sharp-roweled spurs that dug into its sides until the blood jetted forth. The rider's sombrero was blown away, leaving his head covered with nothing save a dark-stained rag.

Parnell did not actually see Salgun at the instant the Mexican caught hold of Chapo's bridle. He did see the dun-colored Cocopah pony hurtle riderless to its death. And not two yards away from the ravine, Chapo was thrashing Salgun about with his head, flailing him with his front hoofs.

Salgun's grip relaxed. With lightning speed Chapo changed ends and kicked the Mexican after the pony.

Parnell and Pablo reached the gray's head at almost exactly the same moment and twined their fingers into the head stall. Chapo was still fighting frantically, but their combined weight and strength were too much for him. Slowly they brought him under submission. Lou was conscious of a small, round face, very white and yet calm, seen dimly through a mist of dust, ashes, and his own perspiration.

"Cut her loose," he gasped.

Pablo's knife flashed around the saddle horn. Tula dropped off lightly and patted Chapo's nose. The horse quickly became quiet.

Even the Indian squatted on his haunches, puffing audibly. Parnell fell prone from sheer exhaustion. Tula knelt beside him, seized his hand, and cried:

"Are you hurt, Luis? Tell me you're not hurt."

He sat up. "No! And you?"

"Of course I'm all right. Why not?"

"That—that fellow had you tied to the saddle. What a narrow squeak! I can't believe yet that you're saved. Why did he tie you?"

"I fought," she explained simply. "But Bernardo came bravely to my rescue at the last, when a cinder scorched Chapo's skin. That partly makes up for all that he did, does it not?"

"You're right, he died a hero. That was magnificent, Tula—what he did. I always half admired him in spite of his wickedness, and I believe you did, too. He really loved you, that's certain."

"But is he really dead? Let's see."

They approached the gorge and looked down upon a pulpy, horrible mass of humanity, apparently lifeless, lying beside a pony with its neck doubled grotesquely under its carcass.

"I'm going down to see," Parnell declared. "I think Bernardo is worth saving, after all. That reata, Pablo. Pay it out carefully so that I won't fall."

He looped the rope about his waist and proceeded carefully down the broken slope. In a minute he bent over Salgun, seeking some sign that life still lingered.

"Ah, señor! You think to have my Tula? No!"

Salgun's eyes opened. His lips parted in a wolfish smile of triumph.

A revolver suddenly appeared in his hand. It spoke once.

Through the air swished an arrow that ripped into the Mexican's cheek His nerveless arm dropped.

Parnell reeled. The bullet had barely scratched his left side.

"Run, Luis! The lava! The lava!"

Just beyond the dead horse appeared the head of the lava river, sloshing, steaming, and sizzling like in a slow but dreadful red fury. Lou's nostrils were filled with a horrible odor as it reached the pony's hips.

He turned and fled. Not once did he look back.

"Odd!" he panted hoarsely to Tula. "I told him that the mountain would claim him, but I certainly didn't foresee this."

They found one of the pack horses half a mile away, rubbing noses with Rosita. Its mate lay in the other crevasse with a broken back. The saddle horses of the other Mexicans were near by, both fatally injured. One of the men was dead and the other passed out without regaining consciousness.

Rosita bore half of Captain's Frayne's gold back to Hotunikat. Parnell trudged behind her, and Tula brought up the rear on her own mount. They were too tired and worn in spirit to talk.

CHAPTER XXII.

LARGESS OF THE GODS.

THE recovery of the gold proved to be a wonderful tonic for Jessica Frayne. Assured that Bernardo Salgun would never trouble her again, she became cheerful and even gay. After see-

ing and handling the shiny nuggets to her heart's content, she pressed Parnell for details of Tula's rescue and also quizzed him regarding the end of her cousin, Howard Hendricks. The only knowledge she had of that occurrence had been conveyed to her in pantomime by the Areneño women.

Parnell answered her questions mechanically, absently, impatiently, almost rudely at times. Somehow victory was not sweet. There was something lacking. Stoutly aided by José's gods—providence—chance—he had triumphed over Salgun and restored Captain Frayne's treasure to its rightful heir with an understanding that his Indian friends were to receive a generous share. More important, Tula had been saved.

Tula! Confound the girl! What was the matter with her, anyway?

Upon reaching Hotunikat she had barely spoken to Miss Frayne. She had personally cared for Chapo and then disappeared inside one of the lodges. Tired, she said, and wanted to rest. True, of course; she had been under a terrific strain; but that scarcely accounted for her remaining in seclusion for two whole days and nights. And Juana, who went into the hut occasionally to take her food and water, swore that she was not sick.

"I believe that she's mourning for that heavy-handed lover of hers, much as she always claimed to hate him," Parnell ruminated miserably. "Seems to think that just because he bulldogged her horse, after he had tied her on and left her powerless to help herself, that he was a martyr. It didn't count when he turned like a snake and tried to murder me while I—poor boob!—was trying to play the good Samaritan. And I guess I had something to do with stopping Chapo myself. Pablo, too; but she hasn't even said thanks to either one of us. Oh, well——"

Gloomily he eyed Smoking Mountain, now lapsed back into quiescence and without even a plume of vapor to herald its inner fires.

"I feel just like that old torpedo," he reflected. "Spent, blown up, done for. And yet, jumpy. Maybe it's just that I can't come down to earth after all that excitement. But I believe it's just some tension in the atmosphere. Volcano's breath."

Arrangements had to be made to get Jessica Frayne and her two-thirds of the gold on their way to San Francisco. He hoped that the vessel which had brought Green and Hendricks would be waiting offshore. They would take her down to the beach he said, and if the captain and the crew did not look too much like pirates, they would put her aboard with her wealth.

That, she agreed, would be the best plan.

Early the next morning they were ready to start. The gold was packed on the pony and Lou's burro, and Rosita was saddled for Miss Frayne. Tula still did not appear and he had decided, in a pique, not to ask her for the loan of Chapo.

"Ready! March!" Lou shouted.

"Wait a minute, please," said Miss Frayne. "Does Tula know that I'm going?"

"Why, I suppose so. Maybe not."

"Well, I'm going to say good-by to her. I've thanked José and all the rest, and I'm not going to ignore Tula."

She went inside the lodge. Ten minutes later she came out, laughing.

"What's the joke?" Parnell asked sourrly. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing—in words. You'll find out what the joke is after you come back."

The *Martha M.* was hove to just in sight of land and put down a boat in answer to their signal. Parnell went aboard with Jessica and helped tell her story to the bluff, hearty old skipper, whom she happened to know by reputation. So he helped stow the gold in the ship's safe, begged some overalls and a

few shirts to replace his own dilapidated garments, and prepared to go ashore.

"Of course it wouldn't do any good to ask you to come on to San Francisco with me," said Jessica Frayne, as he clasped his hand for the last time. "I know it wouldn't."

"Why—why—no. I'm staying for awhile. But I don't know what you mean."

"Well, tell Tula to be sure and write to me as soon as she gets a chance to mail a letter. I know there'll be important news by then. She has my address."

Back on land, he paced about nervously. "Oh, let's go on back to Hotunikat," he proposed to Pablo. "Too hot to travel in daytime, anyway."

They arrived at dawn. Still, Lou did not feel sleepy. He lay down under the *jacal* with his restless thoughts until Tula stepped out into the fresh, bright desert morning.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, running forward. "Tula, are you all right? You're really not sick?"

For a moment her strangely saddened face was lighted by a smile of gladness mingled with unbelief. "You came back?"

"Of course I came back. Is that surprising?"

"Why, I thought—I thought you were going with her."

"What ever put such a crazy notion into your head? Did you think I was in love with her?"

"Lots of things made me think—well, you were very anxious to get her gold for her."

"Because she was a lone woman about to be robbed by a pair of the lowest rascals that ever walked the face of the earth. I'd have done as much, or more, if she had been ninety and cross-eyed. Besides, it was understood all the time that the Areneños were to have a share, and I was working for them as much as for her.

"As for being in love with Jessica it——"

His face fell. He went on more slowly.

"Once I told you, Tula, that I could never ask any woman to have a place in my life. Now I will tell you the reason why.

"When I returned from the war, sick, I found that my father had just died and that the small bank of which he was president had failed. People were calling him a crook, which was unjust because the failure was the result of nothing but the slump in the cattle market. Most of his customers were stockmen, and many were bankrupt.

"I was mad. I got the creditors together and told them what I thought of them. But I also told them that as soon as I could regain my health I'd turn in and pay off their claims if it took me the rest of my life.

"Now my lungs are all right. I've got to keep my word. So, you see, I don't own myself. I owe a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, just as I stand in these rags. Do you think I'd ask any girl to assume such a burden with me?"

"You could have made a start by claiming a reward for getting that gold."

"Oh, I couldn't be such a rotter as that. As a matter of fact, Miss Frayne almost insisted that I accept a share. But I thought she had been generous enough in giving the Indians a third. Besides, I'll benefit to a certain extent from that. I'm going to act as their business manager, invest their funds."

"In a copper mine?"

He recalled the blue-and-green-stained ledges up on Smoking Mountain. "No, that would be too risky. To develop a copper deposit is expensive. And the mine would have to be unusually rich to be profitable this far from a railroad."

"Come and take a ride with me. I want to show you something that I saw on the mountain yesterday."

Mystified, he followed her up to the

foot of the volcano, where the catclaws and the paloverdes were already putting forth tiny green leaves after being singed at the time of the eruption. On their way they crossed several fissures like the one in which Salgun had died.

Tula turned Chapo's nose up an arroyo, then skirted the lip of one of the new gullies. Everything in the way of plant growth was burned away here except a species of barrel cactus that hugged the ground closely and thrust up cruel spines through the blackened stones.

"It's only a little way now," she called back.

She reined in Chapo with his head extending over into space. "Look."

The chasm was narrow here but thirty or forty feet deep. It squarely intersected a ledge that was at least ten feet wide. Clear down to the bottom Lou could see a broad, clean shoot of glittering ore—blue bornite, green malachite, black chalcocite, and copper in several other forms that he did not recognize.

He swayed giddily in the saddle, laughed insanely. He hopped down and tried to break off samples with his bare hands.

"Millions, Tula! That little hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar debt looks like a dinner check at a lunch counter now. I'm no mineralogist, but that jewelry must average twenty-five per cent copper. May be precious metals in it, too. All exposed by nature. No expense for prospecting—just blast it out. The volcano did the development when it made this crack. José's gods are mighty good."

She was smiling faintly at his excitement. Suddenly she reached her hand down to him.

"Good-by, Señor Luis."

"Good-by? What do you mean?" He was struck silly by her abrupt farewell. "Where are you going?"

"To the convent at Hermosillo. There is nothing else left for me. A girl in Mexico without relatives—you understand. My father—you do not know that my father is dead?"

"I didn't know it, Tula. I didn't know it. I'm sorry. And I thought you were unfriendly, or mourning for Bernardo, when you merely wanted to be alone with your grief. How did it happen?"

"He was slain in battle. Those boys who came back to Bernardo brought the word. So—good-by!"

Tears welled to her eyes. She jerked her hand away and spurred Chapo. The gray cantered briskly away while Parnell stared stupidly.

"Can you tie that?" he gasped. "She's riding off and leaving a half interest in a million-dollar mine. She's leaving *me!*"

"Tula! Tula!" he yelled.

He forgot his own horse. Heedless of the sharp stones that cut his soles, of the cactus spines that punctured his feet, he raced down the mountainside.

Once again Parnell overtook the gray—seized the bridle and brought the horse to a stop.

For a moment or so Tula stared intently at him. Then quietly she slid from her horse into his waiting arms.

The Meanest Man

In the club they were talking of men who, though famous and wealthy, were at the same time very mean.

"I once knew a man," said Butler, "who was so economical that he used to cover up his inkwell between dips in case any should be lost by evaporation."

"But I knew a man," observed Cutler, "who stopped his clock every night to prevent the works wearing while everybody was asleep!"

"I know a man meaner than either of those," said Butler. "He gave up reading newspapers in public libraries in order to save his spectacles."



Cupid—Strikes Out

by

Seaburn Brown

A Humorous Baseball Story

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

BRETHREN, th' text for to-day's close harmony discourse is purloined from Patrick Henry's bawl-out of jail conditions, or whatever it was he got burned up about, to wit an' thusly:

"Gimme liberty—or I'll get ossified anyhow!"

Pat may have been in revolt agin' his wife when he cracked that one; if so, he must of lurked near th' door in sprint formation. I, too, crave liberty. Freedom from wimmen. As to imbibin' caper juice, if you'd been through what I have on account of a gir-rl you'd submerge yer indignation in enough fire water to float th' British navy.

An' if ever I fall for another—but th' battle-scarred sergeant-at-arms of th' League for th' Abolition of th' Altar Halter himself would've tumbled headlong for th' woman in this case.

Sayin' she was beautiful is like describin' Texas as a double lot. Her eyes! Even Dave Barry would count Tunney out if th' cultural champ got in their way—or ray. He'd think Dempsey had hit 'im with a bologna skin stuffed with pewee feathers.

An' her dimples! that complexion—those hair! You guess th' rest, as th' hangman hummed while he pulled th' black hood over th' fall guy's eyes. She was glorious, scrumdiferous, an' —Noah Webster, what have you?

I could write on that jane all day; but this post office has a bum pen an' th' inkwell is low.

Everybody on th' team gaped at th' damsel th' day she showed up. It was our first home game of th' year, an' I, as manager of th' Beavers, had to train my glims on th' conflict.

But now an' then I stole a glance at where she sat, in front in th' center of th' grand stand. It's a small stand. A thousand fans is a record crowd in our league, which is bushy as a hazelnut plant; an' she glittered in that settin' like a fine diamond in a brass ring.

Th' boys strutted their stuff—each pastimer handlin' himself like he was a knight of old performin' for his lady fair with one of them spear-headed fish poles.

Such inspiration had th' heat to make a championship club of my outfit, which had years before established legal residence in the second division.

Trouble was—th' opposition was equally hopped up.

I'm ashamed, but I can't remember who won that game. Everything else is elbowed out of memory by a pair of eyes that would melt a block of ice.

I do recollec' we jousted versus th' Milkmen—so called because they represented a dairy town—an' that their manager, Abe Tarnose, acted idiotic on account of th' frill.

Abe cast sheep's eyes—quite a trick, seein' as he's a natural goat—an' all in all behaved scandalous for a goose-necked, flannel-eared, horse-faced ol' lifelong woman hater. He paraded in front of th' bench, bellered orders so you could of heard 'em clean over in Lem Goober's pasture, a mile away. He inflated his chest—another noble feat, since you could measure th' ol' geezer's lung expansion with a micrometer.

I admit I grinned in her direction a time or two. But—ye're only young once. I'm barely fifty-two, countin' Sundays an' holidays. I might reduce thirty pounds, I s'pose; yet they's plenty wimmen who like a solid, substantial man, rather'n them wasp-waisted sheiks.

Maybe I ain't plastered with "It," but th' reason I'm a bachelor ain't because I wasn't frisky as th' next one when I was a lad. Many's th' time I lit out from home, soon's th' cows was milked an' th' pigs fed, an' scorched th' county road tight as our mare could tear to a barn dance—mebbe six or eight miles—an' never thought of hittin' th' hay before quarter to 'leven!

My ol' man thought I'd never settle down.

II.

THAT fathead, Abe Tarnose, still considers he has it on me with th' tremulous sex. Funny, too; him bein' so lanky.

Anyway, Abe kept on cavortin' like a locoed calf all that week. I wouldn't have cared, only I sort of felt like I was responsible for what went on in our home park. It seemed that if a lady guest wanted pointers on baseball an' how to enjoy it, I was th' logical man to give 'em.

More so when Abe strolled to th' wire nettin' in front of th' stand one afternoon, an' took off his cap to show how well harrowed his sparse hair was, an' bowed an' scraped, an' snickered that if she honed for information on th' pastime he'd be proud to unburden.

At th' moment we was at bat in th' last half of th' ninth—th' score tied, one man out. Th' lady looked at Abe amazedlike. I said to myself that if Abe had th' crust to do that, I'd kindly provide somethin' for him to explain.

In I went as pinch-hitter. Of course I'm kind of old as athaletes go, though young as a man generally speakin'; but yer battin' eye is th' last asset to desert you. I could still lean pretty ponderous agin' th' onion.

I grabbed my pet club an' hollered: "Le's see one, big boy!"

Zip! A fast one flashed.

I swung so hard my back was sore for ten days, an' *whango!*—how I did larrup th' pill on th' proboscis!

Next thing I knew I was settin' on th' ground, feelin'—an' lookin', I guess—gol-hanged foolish. In my hands was part of th' bat. A foot of th' end of it was in th' dust halfway to th' pitcher's box. Th' ball lay a rod away toward third base, outside th' foul line.

Th' bat had snapped off an' made me spill head over heels. It snapped because it had been sawed nearly through! Th' sawed space had been filled an' th' surface polished so it didn't show.

I used that bat exclusive—an' Tarnose, th' danged ol' buzzard, knew it.

I got up an' started for him. Th'

spectators was in a fit of laughin', particularly one little sawed-off runty gink in a cheap bleacher seat. His voice was too big for him an' it carried like a pack mule. I'd've taken a smack at him, I do believe, if I hadn't been on my way to Abe.

I said everybody laughed. But th' jane didn't. She was solemn as a dog at a Chinese barbecue.

It dawned on me suddenlike that she didn't know enough baseball to grasp th' joke—she judged it part of th' game. It would've been a dead giveaway to have slugged Abe, so I turned to th' bench an' got a new bat.

I had two strikes left. But th' mob's chucklin' hamstrung me. I fanned.

After th' game I dragged Abe to one side.

"You donkey-headed ol' alfalfa-muncher," I rasped, "you pull one more boyish prank like that on me an' I'll knock hangnails on yer toes. Get me?"

It riled him. "Look pleasant when you intone such syllables in my pearly-pink ears," he came back, "else I'll dress you down so you can wrap yer hatband around you twice for a sash."

I reckon my sprained back prevented a scrap. If it hadn't been lame I'd've tackled him, an' if he'd 'a' known it was sore he'd've tackled me.

III.

WE went on th' road for a coupla series; an' by th' time we got back for a three-week home stand I had forgotten th' pretty filly—almost.

Our first week was wasted on th' Scorpions. As you know, they're th' league leaders, while sixth place looks natural to us as sorghum on wheat cakes.

But th' lady was present to pep me. I found out at th' office that she'd booked her seat for th' season. A lady what ain't keyed up over baseball itself has got to have some reason for exposin' her complexion to th' weather day after day.

I couldn't figure it.

I got me two new uniforms—tailor-made. I led my cripples with dash an' vim: that queen could induce a chipmunk to balance a chip on its shoulder an' insult a bobcat.

An' we trimmed th' Scorpions! I mean, you would call it that. We won three games outa seven, when we hadn't copped that big share of a series from them since gentlemen preferred brunettes.

Th' lady commenced to notice me special. She had to. If you got a frill on yer mind what won't lamp you, you get a white baseball uniform an' a crimson necktie an' coax 'em together. That'll peel th' horn rims off her specs—or she's blind.

She followed me around with her eyes—a puzzled look in 'em. Plainly she was wonderin' where I'd been all her life. That was th' week I celebrated my fifty-second birthday. I didn't feel a day over forty-nine, either!

Next we played th' Flash Lights an' th' Ripsnorters. Our standin' in th' percentage column didn't vary much, but th' lady did. She studied me more intentlike. I had a green tie, too, an' a purple one, an' a yaller, an' one like a barber pole, only th' red stripes was wider'n th' white.

We hit th' trail ag'in for a long spell. Our next home stay was our final one of th' summer—an' wound up with a wrangle versus th' Milkmen.

Th' pitiful condition of their team—in th' cellar on its hands an' knees—was made clear by th' mental ruin of that rambunctious ol' fool, Abe Tarnose.

He had revamped his voice to imitate th' love call of a robin, or a crow: it was a cross between a twitter an' th' tinkle of a pebble in a beer bottle. He

walked with tiny, mincin' steps, knees high, like a trottin' horse.

An' he wore—you'd never guess it! He wore a pair of them pasture-pool pants—plus fours! On them spindle shanks of hisn they looked like baggy knee-pants on a week-old colt. Givin' a noble take-off on an animated gate-leg table r'ared up on two pins, he done a mean strut up an' down, preenin' himself.

I had on my green tie. I'd wore it two days hand runnin'. I dove under th' stands to my locker an' changed to th' red one.

Th' queen *did* watch Abe's contortions, to tell th' truth. Who wouldn't give a look at a woodshed afire?

He was persistent as a March cold, too. For all he cared, th' teams might have played checkers on th' field like they did on th' benches. He wore a reg'lar cow path in front of th' grand stand.

I wasn't goin' t' play follow-th'-leader. I had some sense. Knowin' th' lady appreciated observin' a real master mind of th' diamond in his element, I lounged in th' open, carelesslike, leanin' in athaletic pose on a coupla bats.

IV.

MATTERS tightened in th' last home game—a tingle was in th' air. Th' queen looked more sober'n ever. Abe had wrinkled around his legs a pair of golf sox that must've been designed by a cross-eyed Indian crazy with th' D. T's. He was determined-lookin' an' cantankerous.

Right off he blamed me personally for an accident. He was on sentinel duty, promenadin' in th' path he'd wore, when all to once his heels flew up an' he landed on his neck.

He discovered a smear of grease on th' path, sprinkled over with dust.

"You done that, you bay-windowed hop-toad!" he screeched at me.

"Pipe down," I retorted. "You get my dandruff up an' I'll drown you in a finger bowl."

He started to yap ag'in—then shut up. A pert look popped in his eyes an' he beat it back to his gang.

Th' jane hadn't much use for Abe. I could see that; for she yawned wearylike at his carryin's on.

Th' seat of Abe's plus-fours was kind of greasy from his fall. He laid off paradin' as a result an' reverted to baseball.

It was a wicked tussle. No matter how sad our league ratin' may be, th' boys always make a healthy stab at winnin' th' concludin' fracas.

I outfoxed Abe, as usual, catchin' 'im asleep in th' fifth by buntin' his pitcher to death after we'd been hittin' 'em out.

When th' eighth frame come around we were three or four markers ahead an' not likely to go to bat in th' ninth. Abe didn't 'pear to fret much about th' lead we had until I stepped in to pinch hit.

Not that a hit mattered one way or t'other. I merely itched to thrill th' lady by lacin' out a fence buster.

Th' ol' eye was right! With a *thwack* like a rollin' pin caressin' a bald head, th' pellet soared to th' edge of th' marsh in left field. They relayed it in franticlike an' held me on third.

I got a hand from th' fans an' a vicious gleam from Abe's eye. He yanked th' third-sacker an' substituted a slouchy guy. Abe walked with th' feller a few steps, talkin' to him earnestly. Together they struck me as bein' trustworthy as a bribed jury.

I stuck close to th' bag—right on it, in fact. I was afraid to risk invitin' a trap.

There I was, all set to scamper, with my peepers glued on th' boy at th' plate, when—th' world exploded!

My feet left th' ground so vigorous

my knees dented my chest. You could've heard th' yell I whooped for six miles in yer stockin' feet!

I think I lit for th' first bounce approximately ten feet short of home base—what with th' violence of my leap an' the upward shove of th' giant firecracker th' third baseman had set off under th' bag.

Abe laughed an' rolled on th' ground.

But he didn't roll on th' ground because he laughed so hard. He rolled because th' wallop I treated 'im to would've jarred th' hasps off an elephant's trunk.

I let him get up. He came at me. Rickard's rules of disorder was promptly suspended. My second swing deposited Abe's false teeth in th' water bucket. He caught me a sidewinder on th' mush that dug my chin into th' small of my back.

With that for a warm-up, we had a fight.

Abe'll tell you he licked me. But I ask you: what's a cut head an' dislocated tooth-shelf compared with a fractured nose an' two busted fingers?

Th' answer, for all I know, may be six apples. Th' issue wasn't settled. Th' police an' fire departments, with several of his friends an' a platoon of ball players assistin', finally hauled us apart.

Into th' center of th' group scrambled th' little runty guy with th' bass-drum laugh.

He looked at me an' nigh disjointed his scalp roarin'. Abe's chopped phiz set th' runt off ag'in like a quick fuse.

Finally he calmed so he could speak. "I wanta thank you, boys," he creaked, wipin' th' tears from his glims, "for th' wonderful comedy you put on. It's better'n a show. I hope my wife'll let me come reg'lar next summer, too. She hates baseball an' ain't got no sense of humor. She thinks you guys are a couple of old fools. See? She's sat through this an' not cracked a smile!"

He pointed out th'—th' *queen!*

"She won't let me go no place alone," he blatted on. "So I set out in th' bleachers where I can enjoy myself an' holler as——"

Bam!

Abe tore loose an' slugged th' runt right in th' middle of his sentence, you might say. He started to fall. My trusty right changed his course an' he lit three yards away.

Abe an' me looked at each other sheepish.

"Never ag'in!" he piped.

"Shake!" I lisped with my cracked lip. "No more wimmen in my life!"

A sound turned us toward th' grand stand.

Th' solemn queen, gazin' at her prostrate husband, was laughin' fit to kill!

While ye're dopin' that one—I'll take another stroll.

Just Curiosity

"Is this the speedometer?" asked the pretty girl, tapping the glass with her finger.

"Yes, dear," he replied.

"And that's the clutch?"

"That's the clutch, darling," he said, jamming on his brakes to avoid a fast approaching truck.

"But what on earth is this?" she inquired, at the same time giving the accelerator a vigorous push with her foot.

"This, dear," he said in a soft, celestial voice, "is Heaven." Picking up a harp, he flew away.

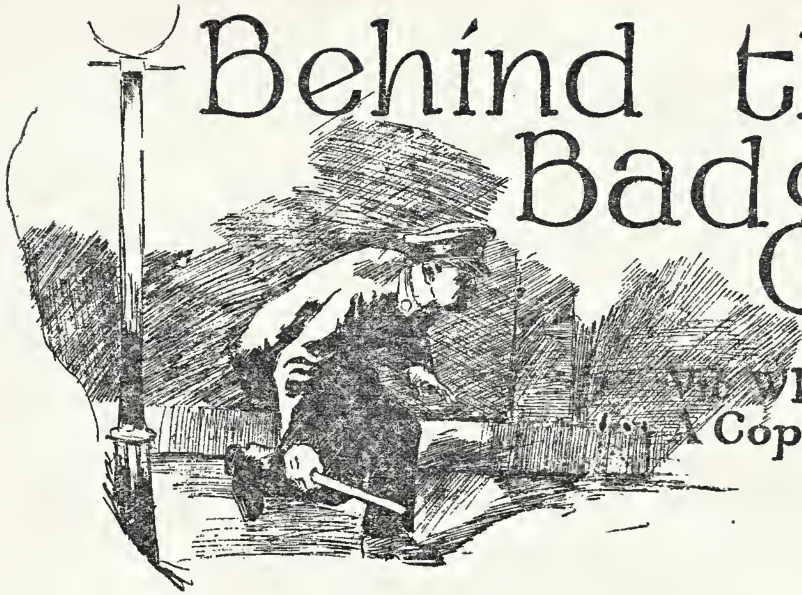
An Exception

"Do you suppose there ever was a human being who didn't talk about his neighbors?" asked the cynical man.

"Yes," said his companion.

"Name him."

"Robinson Crusoe."



Behind the Badge

by Vic Whitman

A Cop Story

(COMPLETE NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

A TOUGH BEAT.

THE alert, slightly freckled face of Officer Tom Rourke, one of the youngest, scrappiest, and most popular men on the force, was grim as he ran down the steps of Station No. 12. He set his uniform cap at a jaunty angle, and proceeded northward along his beat.

Well it might be grim, for Rourke knew that there was action and plenty of it ahead of him. When a man is sent into a trouble district such as Locust Square, he has every need to keep both eyes wide open—particularly if he works the "graveyard" shift from midnight to eight.

Officer Rourke was new on the beat. About two weeks before, Locust Square had suddenly gone bad on the night patrolmen. In that time three different officers had been tried out and found unable to stand the gaff.

Finally the veteran Captain Holt called Rourke aside. "I can't understand what's gotten into 'Big Dan' McNulty and his crew," he said, rubbing at his grizzled jaw. "They're tough and hard-boiled, and they don't do much but gamble and hang around Louie's pool room, but they've always seemed pretty decent as such men go. Anyway, they've apparently developed a grudge against the force, and they're riding every man we send up there for all they're worth. It's a tough assignment, lad. Do you want to tackle it?"

A gleam came into the blue eyes of Officer Rourke. "D'ye want me to clean 'em out?" he asked eagerly.

Captain Holt considered. "I wouldn't exactly advise that," he said finally. "You've been on the force long enough to find out that the one thing an officer doesn't want to do is keep a chip on his shoulder. Yet circumstances alter cases, and I'll let you try out this situation the way you think best. You'll go around with the day man and learn the beat and then we'll put you on. What do you say, lad?"

Red blood coursed swiftly through the veins of young Officer Rourke, and anything that savored of action was meat and drink to him.

"Fine," he answered. "When do I start?"

So this was how Rourke happened to be sauntering along toward Locust Square, eying the passers-by in the dim light of street lamps and swinging his nightstick idly. He didn't know much about the exact situation created by Dan McNulty and his gang, but he did have a very definite idea of what *he* was going to do.

Trouble very seldom came into the life of Tom Rourke, but whenever it did he went after it, unearthed it, and abolished it. It was a good method and it always worked, and he saw no reason why he shouldn't apply it to Locust Square.

"They may be tough out here," he muttered, setting his uniform cap at an aggressive angle, "but there's others."

In truth Officer Rourke looked as though he might be able to take care of himself. He was not too big—about five feet ten, weighing a hundred and seventy. The man was evenly proportioned, solid-jawed, and wore on his face the ruddy hue of health that had come from twenty seven years of work and play outdoors.

Besides the air of authority given him by the uniform and the shining badge, a subtle something told the world that here was a man who had fought men and temptations and fought them well. For a year now Tom Rourke had been a patrolman, and the predictions of the old-timers were that he was a comer.

The sickly yellow gleams of the Locust Square lights drew near and half-unconsciously Rourke pulled his belt up a notch. He didn't anticipate trouble right away—he knew that he would be carefully sized up before anything started—but he was ready.

For a moment or two he stood outside the pool room of Louie the "Greek," listening to the click of the balls, laughter, and the hum of talk. Probably Big Dan McNulty and his gang were in there. Rourke decided to go in, buy a package of gum, and look them over.

A man, small and rat-faced, appeared in the doorway, hesitated as he saw Rourke, and then came down the steps. Before he spoke he looked cautiously up and down the street; then said out of the corner of his mouth: "Lookin' for Dan?"

Rourke inspected the man from head to foot, taking his time about it. "Maybe," he said. "Why?"

The other looked furtively over his shoulder at the pool-room door.

"Him and a bunch are shootin' craps over in the shack," he said. "I thought you might want to know."

"P'raps I do," said Rourke coolly, "but first I want to know who you are and why it is you're tellin' me this."

The little man grinned apologetically, sheepishly. "My name's Gregg," he explained, "and I'm givin' you the low-down on Dan because he done me dirt. Ain't that reason enough?"

"What did he do to you?"

"Well, he told me to keep watch and see if 'Whitey' Flint hung 'round his sister. I got better things to be doin' than watchin' dames, and because I wouldn't do it he gimme the gate from the bunch. See?"

"Can't say I blame him," thought Rourke. He thoroughly disliked this rat-faced individual, but he knew the stool pigeon might be valuable.

"Might as well show McNulty right at the start who's goin' to be boss around here," reflected Rourke. He looked down at the stool pigeon, and frowned. Aloud he said: "All right. Show me where this crap game is. And mind, if this is a frame-up and you're leadin' me into anythin' funny, you'll get yours later and you'll get it good and proper."

"I'm on the level," protested Gregg hurriedly. "No kiddin'. C'mon, I'll prove it."

He turned and hastened down a short, dark street. At the end of the street he stopped and pointed to an old two-story house. Light showed on the first floor, coming through rents in the blind, and Rourke crept close.

Inside, voices were raised in appeal: "Twenty bucks on the mat, and I let it ride! Keep smokin', bones, and show me the way! Seven'll do, or 'leven! There they roll, an' what do they say? Six is my point, an' I never miss! Count out six, dice, an' bring home 'at forty! If I make it I'll shoot it! Ah-hh! I read six right!"

CHAPTER II.

RESISTING ARREST.

FROM the noise and the sound of bodies moving about he judged that there must be seven or eight men in the game. He motioned to Gregg and they moved out of hearing.

"Was I right?" demanded the little man triumphantly.

"You seemed to be," admitted Rourke curtly, "but just to be on the safe side you'd better come along with me so I can keep an eye on you for the next few minutes."

He went to the nearest call box, unlocked it, and rang in. "Send the "wagon" up, Tim," he told the desk sergeant, "and three or four men with it. I'm thinkin' I'll have a load. No, there's no riot, but get 'em here as soon as you can. End of the first street on the right past Louie's. Right?"

"Right," came the answer, and the click of a receiver.

A rookie cop, anxious to obtain the commendation of his superiors, might have broken in on the game single-handed, and taken a beautiful lacing for his pains. Not so Officer Rourke. It was not only discretion to have aid in such a case; it was better business. He leaned against the pole and waited.

A few minutes, and the wagon drew up before his outstretched hand. Four husky men jumped off, their badges now and then throwing back the ray of a street light.

Rourke grinned at them. "McNulty and his gang shootin' craps," he said laconically. "Let's go."

He led them to the house, and waited, his ear to a crack of the door, until he knew there was money in the pot. Cautiously he tried the knob, and found the door locked. He beckoned to the biggest of the four officers, and together they drew back and lunged forward. The door gave with a splintering crash, and Rourke stumbled into the midst of the game. The players looked up, astounded, their jaws dropping as they saw the blue uniforms.

Rourke instantly picked out Big Dan McNulty, a long-limbed, strapping youth with fair hair and reckless eyes.

"Hello, Dan," he said coolly. "I'm glad to see you. My name's Rourke, and I'm plannin' to stay on this beat for a long time. What d'ye think o' that?"

McNulty rose slowly to his feet. "The devil!" he said, as coolly. "It's the cops!"

With a sudden leap and a swing of his big arm he smashed the only light bulb in the room. Instantly Rourke sprang catlike to one side, barely in time to escape McNulty's plunge, then charged forward. A fist slammed into his cheek, staggering him and almost flooring him. Instinctively he swung his nightstick.

The stick jarred in his hand as it struck flesh, and he heard the sound of a form dropping to the floor. A struggling pair surged into him, but he didn't dare strike with the nightstick again lest he hit one of his mates. He backed away, tugging at his pocket flash light.

A window pane shattered into a thousand fragments. Rourke sent the slender beam of light in the direction

of the sound, and saw McNulty climbing through the window. With a rush Rourke cleared a way to the door, and dashed out.

McNulty had just dropped to the ground and was starting away when Rourke nailed him with a flying tackle. The force of the dive broke his hold, and both men came to their feet at the same time. McNulty swore, and rushed, his fists driving out ahead.

It is no part of an officer's duty to engage in a fist fight unless it is unavoidable. Rourke would have liked nothing better than to have met McNulty squarely and given back blow for blow. But he had been too well trained for that.

As McNulty came charging in, after the methods of the street fighter, Rourke stepped lightly to one side and thrust out a leg. McNulty stumbled over it, lost his balance, and fell, and before he could rise Rourke was on him and had snapped the 'cuffs on.

"There, Dan," he panted, picking up his cap and brushing it. "Now we'll be givin' you a free ride."

McNulty jerked the hair back out of his eyes.

"What a swell guy *you* are!" he rasped. "I ain't gonna forget this!"

"I hope you don't, Dan," said Rourke softly. "As I said before, I'm plannin' to stay on this beat a long time. Whenever you want to collect come around."

The sounds of combat in the house were dying away, and presently the four patrolmen emerged, disheveled and bloody, but triumphant. In a dark-room battle the beams of pocket flash lights are disconcerting and effective. Sullenly the gamblers came along.

"Don't think I'll go in with you, Mac," Rourke told one of the officers, as the patrol wagon left its parking place down the street. "Somethin' else might break, so I guess I'll hang around. Put 'em on the blotter for rollin' the bones, and resistin' arrest."

He nodded to his mates, grinned at the raging McNulty, and walked away, smoothing out his disarrayed uniform as he went. The exercise had given him an appetite, and he decided to take a few minutes for an egg sandwich and a cup of coffee. There was a small restaurant about a block away from Louie's pool room.

What he found there was wholly unexpected. A small, dark, neatly-bobbed head, red, curving lips, and luminous black eyes—these were the things he saw behind the counter. Strange things can happen in the swiftness of a glance, and to Tom Rourke the plain cleanliness of an all-night lunch stand suddenly assumed the atmosphere of a palace where a queen holds regal sway. Rather red of face, he removed his cap, and took a seat at the counter.

"Cup o' coffee and an egg sandwich, please, miss," he said as the girl looked inquiringly at him.

Then he noticed the man at the other end of the counter, noticed him and recognized him. Whitey Flint was his name, and he was light to the point of pallidness, slender, pale-eyed, and sinister like a snake continually coiled to strike. Whitey was known at headquarters as a man with dangerous criminal possibilities. He had a slight record there, too.

"Hello, Whitey," said Rourke in response to the other's nod. "I thought you generally hung out over in the south side."

Flint glanced at the girl and smiled thinly, and Rourke remembered what Gregg had told him. It disturbed him, now that he had seen the girl, and he felt vaguely drawn into sympathy with Big Dan. So this was McNulty's sister, this girl who had the power to make a man feel that he was all hands and feet! He looked at her and saw that she was regarding him in very evident anger.

"I do generally," came Whitey's answer in his soft, hissing voice, "but there ain't any law against my comin' over here whenever I want to, is there?"

With Miss McNulty's eyes on him in that fashion Rourke was confused.

"No, Whitey," he responded. "There's no law against it."

The girl's voice sounded, cold and hard: "Did you arrest my brother tonight?"

Redder than ever became the face of Officer Rourke.

"I guess I did," he admitted, shuffling his feet, "if you're Miss McNulty."

CHAPTER III.

HIDDEN ENEMIES.

HE looked much like a small boy accused of stealing apples, and she noticed it. But just then she wasn't interested in such things.

"What did he do?" she demanded.

"He was rollin' the dice."

Nancy McNulty bit her lip. She wished that Dan would give up gambling and loafing around the pool room, and take up steady work. Often she had pleaded with him, but without much result. Yet, now, she wouldn't take sides with this new cop.

"Did you have to arrest him for that?"

A slight snicker from Whitey Flint brought irritation to Officer Rourke.

"No, miss," he said, "I didn't *have* to arrest him, but I did. Now, if it's not too much trouble could I have that sandwich and coffee?"

Nancy stared at him for a long moment, lightning in her eyes. Then she flounced around and seized a frying pan as though she were going to hit him with it.

"Ooh!" she gasped. "Of all the hateful cops I ever met!"

And in stony silence she cooked his egg, stood frigidly at the other end of the counter while he ate it, made haughty change for him, and watched with smoldering eyes as he walked out.

That marked the beginning of things for Officer Tom Rourke. He appeared in court next morning against McNulty and his gang, and the hard looks he got promised much for the future. By pooling their money they found they had enough to pay the combined fines, and they left the room free men.

"Now the fireworks'll start," prophesied more than one grizzled old war horse. "That Locust Square ain't goin' to be a nice place from now on. Well, here's hopin' Rourke don't get a broken head."

The fireworks did start that night. As Rourke turned the corner by Louie's pool room, two dim figures appeared well ahead of him and called out insultingly to him, hurling epithets. He started after them, then ducked suddenly as he saw one of the men swing an arm. A rotten egg whizzed by his head and broke against a pole.

"The dirty bums!" muttered Rourke, the light of battle coming into his eyes. "If I don't get 'em for this——"

He broke into a run after them, and they led him for half a block, then turned suddenly down a dark alleyway. Without thought of what might be in the alley, Rourke dashed in after them, tripped over a rope stretched ankle high, and plunged headlong knocking the breath from his body and scraping all the skin off his nose.

Not long after that the whistle over fire station No. 3 sounded. Rourke stopped and listened. The alarm signified a fire somewhere in the district at the other end of his beat. Red-faced and panting he arrived at the alarm box from which the call had gone in, and found two pieces of apparatus and an angry fire crew.

"So help me, I don't know a thing about this, chief," Rourke told deputy-chief Whalen, "but I got a hunch."

Some ten minutes later when the apparatus had returned to its quarters, another alarm came in. Again Rourke sprinted on the chance that it might be a fire, but the situation was the same as before.

"I wish to the devil you'd play that hunch o' yours," snapped Whalen, climbing back on the hook and ladder. "Seems as if some o' you birds down there at twelve could do somethin' in this district besides walk around."

Rourke grinned. He knew that Whalen was noted for the sharpness of his tongue, and that he meant nothing of what he said.

"Keep your shirt on!" he retorted. "If there'd been a blaze you'd never have been able to put it out!"

But nevertheless he was aroused fully as he went back to the square. War had been declared and would be waged until one side or the other had declared an armistice. And Tom Rourke knew he would never quit. He'd hound Dan McNulty and his followers, running them in at every opportunity, until they begged for mercy.

He felt a twinge of regret as he saw the blue light outside the restaurant. It was tough when a girl like Miss McNulty looked at a man like he was a dog. After all, it might not do any harm if he cleaned up Dan's gang first and left Dan till the last. And, come to think of it, he could stand an egg sandwich and a cup of coffee.

There may be those who will criticize Officer Rourke as being partial, but then, they never saw Nancy McNulty. Standing behind the counter; she was a lovely flower blooming among weeds.

He didn't dare talk to her, because her mouth had straightened ominously the moment she saw him, but it was enough just to look at her. Yes, the more he thought of it, the more he knew it wouldn't do any harm to leave Dan till the last.

She served him his egg and coffee. Then without a word took a jar down from a shelf and put it beside him.

Rourke looked up, surprised. "What's this, miss?"

"Salve," she said crisply. "For your nose."

"Oh." Rourke grinned. "Well, I'm obliged."

She made an impatient little gesture. "I'd do as much for my worst enemy if his nose looked as though it had been run through a meat chopper," she informed him clearly. "Now use that salve before your nose swells, and don't try to talk. I'm not a bit interested."

Regularly every night Rourke was greeted with boos and jeers from the darkness, and often hard missiles streaked past him or thudded against his body. Angrily he would turn to give chase, but it was always the same —nobody in sight.

To retaliate he took in whomever he could on the slightest pretext.

On two different occasions he found a man he knew to be one of McNulty's crowd half drunk on the street. He might have merely ordered these men home to bed, and ordinarily he would have, but each time he marched his arrest in to the station.

Occasionally the rat-faced little Gregg would sidle up to whisper of a small card game that was going on somewhere. With fire in his eye Officer Rourke would crash in on the game, and place all the participants at the disposition of the law.

Lounging on the street corners was another misdemeanor that rapidly got to be a crime in Locust Square, and more than one hapless citizen of the district felt the weight of Rourke's nightstick. In an incredibly short time Tom Rourke was the most unpopular cop who had ever patrolled Locust Square.

"The lad's gone amuck," Captain

Holt told Sergeant Tim who sat at the desk. "The line of men he brings in here reminds me of the big parade, and his total of weekly arrests would make a fair-sized telephone number.

" 'Twouldn't be so bad if he was bringing in the right men, but I don't think he is, because the riding still keeps up worse than ever. And now there's beginning to be a number of breaks on his beat. I've had several reports come in from storekeepers of windows smashed and things taken.

"That's bad business, Tim, and it's got to stop if I have to put every man in this station up there with a machine gun. I figure it's all done to get back at Rourke." The captain sighed. "I'll give him three more days," he finished, "and then if things don't change I'll take him off that beat."

CHAPTER IV.

A SOCK IN THE DARK.

REPORTS had apparently gone elsewhere, too, for Nancy McNulty was colder than ever toward Officer Rourke. He was trying to figure out the reason now, as he made his way toward the restaurant for his sandwich and coffee.

He wasn't troubling Dan—as a matter of fact Dan hadn't been around much lately, any more than had Whitey Flint—but Nancy didn't seem to appreciate that fact. Rourke shook his head sadly. It was tough, this business of being a cop, when a girl who fitted nicely into a man's dreams of a home acted like that.

The angry sound of men arguing fell upon Rourke's ears as he reached the restaurant, and then blows received and given. He hastened out to investigate, gripping his nightstick tightly. He passed a dark doorway in the building next the restaurant, and dropped like a log as something crashed down on his head.

About five minutes later he opened his eyes. He didn't know where he was but that didn't matter. A girl was bending over him, putting wet cloths on his head, and through the mist swimming before his eyes he recognized Nancy McNulty.

He grinned feebly. "I'll take a wallop any time if it's goin' to be like this," were the words she heard.

She drew quickly away, half-angry. Then as Rourke's lids flickered and closed again, she bent over him stroking his head gently with her hand, her eyes studying his face with its freckles, its sturdy jaw, and its clean mouth.

"I been waitin' all my life for this," sighed Officer Rourke.

Could it be that for the merest instant a twinkle showed in the black eyes of Nancy McNulty? Perhaps.

Yet her voice was severe. "Do you feel any better now?"

Rourke's lids drew back again. This time he could see her more clearly. Dark, bobbed hair was falling about her cheeks making a silken frame for a face of satin. Rourke sighed.

"No," he told her. "Honest, I'm sick as a dog."

Perhaps, too, a smile lay behind the quick bite she gave her lip.

"Are you really?"

"I sure am. I think my head needs to be rubbed some more."

She had taken her hand away, and she didn't make any move to put it back. She sat watching him, and the expression in her face puzzled him. Curiosity, disdain, a bit of sympathy, and something else.

"You did get hit pretty hard, didn't you?" she said. "Have you any idea who did it?"

He was almost sorry that she had asked that question, for it brought the final issue squarely before him. And if he was to continue on the force he knew he would have to meet the issue squarely.

"Yes," he said slowly, his face hardening. "I *know* who did it."

"Perhaps you deserved it," she said lightly. "I've been expecting something of the sort to happen for some time."

Officer Rourke sat up and stared at her. "I deserved it!" he repeated. "For the love o' Mike, what have I been doin' to deserve gettin' crowned?"

"You know very well what you've been doing." Her voice held a note of contempt, now.

"Beggin' your pardon, Miss McNulty, I don't."

She told him, snapping the words out at him. "You've been hiding behind the badge!"

Still Rourke stared.

"You've been abusing your authority and making arrests right and left when you didn't have to. Do you realize that you've taken in most of the boys around the square here, when they haven't done a thing?"

Rourke's jaw dropped. "Say, listen," he began, but she cut him short.

"It isn't fair at all. You've got the law behind you, and they haven't. You're acting the part of a coward. I'm wondering if you'd dare to meet one of those boys when you didn't have your badge on. I doubt it. They'd half kill you."

Brick red became the face of Officer Rourke as he listened. And he had laid off Big Dan thinking to spare his sister's feelings! He hardly knew that he had been hit on the head at all now, such was the strengthening powers of her verbal flaying.

Behind the badge, was it? A coward! He'd been sent into a trouble district to straighten things out, and he was doing his best. She wasn't judging him by the standard of the service, but she *was* judging him by the standard of manhood. And her opinion cut and burned. He smiled, and the smile was not pleasant to see.

"So that's the way you feel," he said slowly. He reached for his cap and got to his feet. "I'm obliged for what you done, gettin' me in out o' the alley," he finished. "I'll be goin' now."

Head erect, shoulders thrown back, fighting mad in every fiber, he walked to the door and went out. Nancy McNulty watched him go, her black eyes inscrutable. But suddenly she was glad; glad that she had spoken her mind, glad that her words had brought that bulge to his jaw, glad that she had thrilled to the glint in his blue eyes.

Humming she went about her work, and a happy little smile edged her red lips. But Officer Rourke knew nothing of this. He was through with women, definitely through with them. Behind the badge! With purposeful step he strode toward the pool room of Louie the Greek.

Little Gregg, the rat, met him just before he got there, met him and sidled up to him. "Lookin' for Dan?"

"Yes," snapped Rourke. "Where is he?"

"He's in Louie's. He's feelin' pretty good, too. I ain't s'posed to tell this, but he gave Whitey an awful beatin' up last night. And there's goin' to be trouble on account of it, too."

Rourke heard, but he said nothing. Later he would seek out Gregg and find out what it meant. Just now he had but one thought in his head.

It was a noisy, laughing crowd inside the pool room, but the noise died away five seconds after Rourke stepped in the door. Hostile glances were directed his way, and men muttered things to each other under their breath.

CHAPTER V.

MAULING FISTS.

ROURKE paid no attention, either to the pool players or the nervous Louie who was watching him apprehensively from behind his little coun-

ter. Across the room Rourke saw Big Dan McNulty looking at him with a sneer on his lips, and the eyes of the two men clashed.

Then Rourke strolled slowly over, and the players grasped their cues by the small ends and felt longingly of the butts. It was a cinch that cop wasn't going to pull anything in there!

"Dan," said Rourke softly, "you don't like me much, do you?"

McNulty laughed without mirth. "Can't say I got any love for you," he replied. "Why? What kind of a dirty trick are you tryin' to put over?"

Rourke flushed, but his voice was steady and low. "You'd like to be gettin' a crack at me, wouldn't you, Dan?"

McNulty licked his lips. His face was hard and his eyes were reckless, but there was a look about him that suggested Nancy.

"There's nothin' I'd like better," he sneered, "but I got a fine chance o' doin' it! If you'd only come out o' that uniform for ten minutes——"

"That's just exactly what I'm goin' to do, Dan," said Rourke very quietly. "It'll be man to man, and may the best win."

McNulty stared incredulously. "What are you talkin' about!" he demanded. "Are you tryin' to kid me?"

Rourke shook his head. "No, I'm not tryin' to kid you," he answered. "You and I'll go out somewhere and fight it out with bare knuckles. I'll let you name the place."

McNulty laughed harshly. "Wouldn't I be a fine bozo to go out with you and run into a bunch o' cops!" he snorted. "I dunno what you got up your sleeve but I know it's dirty."

Rourke smiled again, as he had smiled in the restaurant. "They tell me I been hidin' behind this badge," he said levelly, "so I just thought I'd find out who was the best man between us two, Dan. Of course, if you're scared o' me——"

"Listen to him!" scoffed Big Dan. "Scared o' him! If that ain't a pip!" He broke off and studied Rourke for a moment, studied him with chilling eyes. And what he saw in the officer's steady, grim gaze decided him. "I'll take a chance," he announced.

"Good!"

The listening men in the room had turned to statues, and Rourke looked from one to the other of them, then back to McNulty.

"We can go alone, Dan, wherever you say," Rourke said, "or we can bring along some o' your pals. What d'ye think?"

McNulty hesitated, then addressed the room:

"You fellers keep on with your games," he ordered. "I won't be gone long—maybe half an hour."

Protests arose, for every one wanted to see the fight. But McNulty quickly stilled them. This was to be between man and man with no witnesses and no quarter given or asked.

There was an old deserted barn up at the other end of Locust Square, and to this they went, walking in silence. A lantern hung from a rafter inside, and McNulty lighted it.

Rourke glanced about him, saw there was ample room, and stripped methodically to the waist, tossing his coat, shirt, headpiece, and accouterments in one corner. Then he turned to find Big Dan McNulty waiting for him, his magnificent torso white in the yellow light, his eyes narrowed and cold.

McNulty outweighed Rourke by twenty pounds, besides having the advantage of a full two inches in reach. But odds didn't bother Rourke in the least. Although he knew Big Dan's reputation as a terrific fighter, he hesitated not an instant.

"Ready!" He clipped the word with metallic voice.

McNulty fell into the crouch that had won him many a battle, and came

weaving in, his left probing out before him, his right held back for an opening.

Such methods were not those of Officer Rourke. He sprang, jabbing for the head. McNulty ducked, and Rourke brought his right hard to the body.

Big Dan grunted, and countered with a hard left and right. The one Rourke took on his shoulder; the other smacked against his cheek. McNulty leaped for the follow-up, but Rourke stopped him with a straight smash to the heart.

A gleam of caution shone in McNulty's eyes, a brief glimmer of the tribute that fighter pays to fighter. This cop knew how to handle his dukes! Weaving, circling, ducking, McNulty bored in, and again Rourke met him.

Spat! Rourke had feinted for the body, drawing down McNulty's guard, then had slammed in a right that landed over Big Dan's eye with crushing force. Instantly Rourke swung again, aiming for the jaw, missed, and went slightly off balance.

Before he could recover, McNulty spun with a lightning right to the jaw. It was a terrific punch and Rourke went down, lights sparkling and exploding in his head. It seemed to him he was down for a minute; actually he was back on his feet in a few seconds, shaking his head to clear it, and covering up before the blows that McNulty rained in on him.

Another opening showed, and Rourke's fist found it. McNulty jabbed sharply twice, and Rourke countered with two straight lefts to the face. A flurry of blows followed, both men standing toe to toe, slugging away for all they were worth, fighting with teeth tightly locked and eyes cold, fighting in silence save when a solid body smash brought a gasp from one or the other.

Crimson appeared on both their faces and streamed down over their white bodies. A lucky swing of Rourke's dazed McNulty for a moment, and in that moment Rourke pivoted with a vicious uppercut.

Fair on the jaw it caught Big Dan, and he staggered back five feet and fell. Up he came as though he had bounced, his white teeth showing in a snarl. A sudden charge and he was on Rourke, lashing for the face, while Rourke braced himself and battered away at the body.

Suddenly out of the corner of his eye Rourke saw dim figures about, and heard a voice that sounded like Whitey Flint's:

"Get that cop, too, and get him good!"

Instinctively, Rourke leaped one side. It was well he did for a fence picket swished down by his head, cutting the air where he had been. The man who had swung it was lifting it again, but Rourke was trained to emergencies such as this. Both his fists shot to the face and the man went down, his shoulders hitting the floor.

Rourke's mind, working with swift precision, seized upon what Gregg had told him. All in a second he knew that this was Whitey Flint's gang come after Big Dan McNulty. But Whitey had said: "Get that cop, too!" and that meant that he was involved.

The thought flashed through his head that now he was not behind the badge. An odd thought, that, since he was an officer of the law with or without the uniform, but he felt somehow that he was going now by the authority of fist rather than by the authority of the nightstick or blackjack.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COILING SNAKE.

ROURKE saw three men hurl themselves upon Big Dan, saw Big Dan swing desperately twice, and then catapulted into the mix-up, his roar filling the barn:

"I'm with you, Dan: Let's go!"

His fist, flailing out before him, caught one man just under the ear. The fellow crumpled and sagged down like a wilted leaf. Another, he caught by the shoulder and yanked back; then knocked him clear across the floor.

Just in time Rourke turned to see a dark-haired man draw a knife and steal upon McNulty. Rourke's heavy boot shot up, the knife clattered to the floor. The dark-haired man howled in agony as he clutched at his wrist.

Then the attack seemed to swerve to Rourke. He was forced back against the wall, slamming and jabbing at the faces that bobbed up in front of him. One or two of the faces disappeared.

Fists appeared out of nowhere and spatted against his face, and once a knife raked a long gash in his arm. Something solid struck him just below the temple, and his head swam. He struck out with his left, hit somebody, and then took a smash in the mouth.

In front of him gleamed the eyes of a big assailant as he raised a wedge of wood to bring down on Rourke's head. Rourke saw the arm go up, but he couldn't seem to raise his own arms. He expected to see that arm descend.

Suddenly the man flew back as if a tornado had hit him. The man next him, who was trying to get a punch at Rourke, went plunging headlong over a pile of débris. Then Rourke's blurred vision beheld Big Dan McNulty standing by his side, his arms working back and forth with the speed and effect of pistons.

Back and forth, up and down the length of the barn surged the fight. Clothes were torn. The sounds of fists hitting flesh were frequent and sharp and wicked. Two men against ten and fighting magnificently! Several forms on the floor testified to the powers of these two.

Officer Rourke seemed to be fighting in a dream. Things seemed unreal to him, and he wondered if they appeared that way to Dan. Automatically he would swing and duck and swing again, but there was no consciousness of effort. He knew that Captain Holt wouldn't approve of one of his men taking part in a gang fight, but this was merely self-defense. A piece of lead pipe came hurtling through the air at him. He saw it coming and dodged.

Whitey—where was he? He was the man Rourke wanted. He kicked a little man's feet from under him, and looked about. Ah! there was Whitey, standing well out of things, his pallid face deadly. He was reaching for his hip pocket, his eyes on Big Dan.

Rourke cast about for the piece of lead pipe, gripped it, and sent it whirling. It struck Whitey in the stomach, and doubled him up like a jackknife. It was a ludicrous sight, and Rourke laughed, hardly knowing that he was laughing.

But Whitey had a gun in his hand, and that shouldn't be. Rourke reached him at the same time Big Dan did, and they both hit him in the face at the same time, just as he was straightening up. No, Whitey wouldn't bother any more.

There were four men left, but they were little and insignificant, and they had seen Whitey go down. Such berserk fighting was not in their scheme of things. They disappeared suddenly.

With the battle won, McNulty looked at Rourke and Rourke looked at McNulty.

"Well, Dan," panted Rourke, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, "shall we go on with our own little scrap or shall we call it a night?"

McNulty looked long at Rourke; then a slow grin started on his bruised, swollen lips, a grin that Rourke answered.

"'Twas a good fight, Dan," continued Rourke, running a finger tenderly over a purple eye. "A good fight." He looked at the figures on the floor. One or two of them were stirring. "But there's more work for me. D'ye s'pose there's any rope around?"

McNulty's grin faded. "Aw, let 'em go!" he said, his big chest heaving to the ache in his lungs. "They was only goin' by what Whitey told 'em. What's the sense o' takin' 'em in?"

Rourke considered. Big Dan was right. What was the sense? If Big Dan could afford to be generous, he could. But he'd take Whitey Flint along, Whitey and that fellow who'd pulled the knife. He told Big Dan that.

Big Dan nodded. "Well, that's all right," he said.

Rourke dragged the dark-haired man over to where Whitey was crumpled, and handcuffed them together. McNulty watched him.

"You're pretty regular at that," said McNulty. He hesitated. "But tell me this—what was the idea o' ridin' us so much?"

Rourke looked up, astonished. "Ridin' you!" he exclaimed. "Say, listen, you and your bunch was doin' the ridin'!"

Big Dan shook his head. "Not a thing did we do," he said. "Seems as if the last two or three cops on the beat have had a grudge against us. We were beginnin' to get sore."

Sincerity was in his voice, and Rourke believed him.

"H'm," he said thoughtfully. He glanced down at Whitey Flint and frowned, busy with an idea. Whitey had always hated Big Dan and perhaps——

A little man lying by a stall groaned, and sat up rubbing his head. Rourke peered at him. It was Gregg, the stool.

"Listen, you!" said Rourke harshly, standing over him. "I want straight dope. Did Whitey have anything to do with all the bum jokes that have been pulled on me around the square?"

Still dazed, Gregg shrank back under the glare in Rourke's one good eye. "Yeah," he quavered. "He figured the cops would blame it onto Dan. He wanted to get Dan in wrong."

Rourke nodded grimly. "How about that sock on the head I got up by the restaurant?" he demanded. "Was that Whitey, too?"

"Yeah," said Gregg hastily. "He had it in for you because you was hangin' around Nancy McNulty. Easy, now. It ain't my fault! I wouldn't ha' been here at all to-night, only Whitey made me."

"All right!" snapped Rourke. "Now get out o' here while you still got a whole hide! Fade!"

And the rat-faced Gregg, who talked too much, crept to his feet and slunk away, his outlines melting into the darkness of the night. Rourke turned to McNulty.

"I've been wrong, Dan," he said, "but from now on I won't be. I'll try to make it up to the boys somehow, for takin' 'em in so much. Will you shake?"

McNulty hesitated, then gripped Rourke's outstretched hand. "Sure," he said. "I see how it was."

"You'd make a mighty fine cop, Dan," said Rourke, "and I think I could get you on."

McNulty nodded. Nancy had been after him a great deal lately.

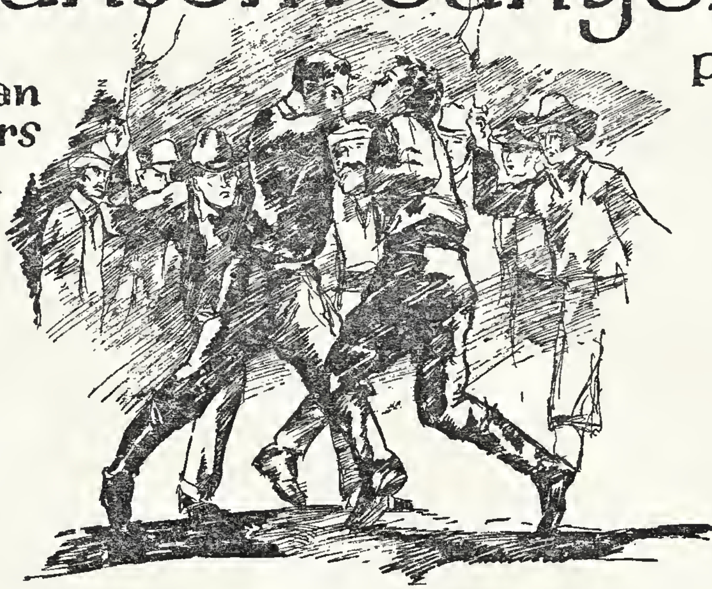
"I'll think it over," he answered. He indicated Whitey and the dark-haired man with a jerk of his head. "Are you goin' to take them in now?"

"I am. And after that——" A beatific light appeared in the blue eyes of Officer Rourke. "After that I'm thinkin' an egg sandwich and a cup o' coffee will hit the right spot."

Feud of Phantom Canyon

By
Whitman Chambers

Part IV



THINGS went hard for "Tex" Barry and "Shorty" Metcalf. Hogan and his gang of cattle rustlers and holdup men found out that the two prospectors had discovered gold. The exact location of the claim was unknown to Hogan and his allies.

In attempting to file their claims, Shorty escaped the hands of the enemies only after he had taken a beating. Tex Barry was forced, after successfully eluding two attempted holdups, to strike down the sheriff, who was trying to arrest him on a trumped-up charge of murder.

Barry joined Metcalf at the ranch of their friend Landsdowne. There he found the sheriff, who seemed friendly and told Barry that he would not arrest him for murder. The man Tex was charged with killing had broken his neck when Barry had shot his horse from under him, the night before. Metcalf believed that the sheriff was in league with Hogan and his gang.

Esther Landsdowne went to town that evening, carrying with her the papers to file on the claims. The sheriff accompanied her. Until the necessary legal steps were taken, Barry and Metcalf were in danger of losing their gold mine.

CHAPTER XVI.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

FOR some time the three men sat in silence, drinking in the heavy perfume that comes with the desert night. Then Frank Landsdowne tapped the ashes out of his pipe and asked:

"Shorty, what are you planning to do with your claims now?"

Shorty sighed deeply. "The work is just beginning, Frank. We got to prove 'em first. I know we didn't hit any pocket. I know I've found the old river bed at last. But we got to make sure before we can go ahead."

"How extensive is this deposit, do you believe?"

"Well, as near as I can figger, it's about a quarter of a mile wide. It runs diagonally across the canyon, jest like I've always claimed. Roughly, it might be a mile long."

"A river bed only a mile long, Shorty?"

The little prospector explained, not without a certain satisfaction. He found it pleasant, after being scoffed at for so many years to prove to the world that he knew his geology.

"Yuh see, Frank, the ridges on each side o' the canyon are capped with sandstone strata about four hundred feet thick. Naturally, we can't work very far under them sandstone caps with a placer proposition. The dirt wouldn't pay to mine. But by hydraulicking, we can take out a lot o' money."

"Then the only part of the river bed you can work is the part that has been exposed by the erosion of the sandstorm stratum."

"That's all, Frank. It may be about a mile long an' a quarter of a mile wide. But it's enough fer us all."

"And you are going to file on the whole piece?"

"Every bit of it," Shorty nodded. "Why? Was yuh thinkin' yuh might like to locate a claim or two?"

Landsdowne sighed. "I was thinking of something like that, yes," he admitted. "I'm a cattleman, Shorty. I always have been and I suppose I always will be. But the day of the big cattleman is gone.

"Modern methods and line fences and agricultural colleges are making it mighty hard for the cattlemen of my generation. A good many of us have gone under. And, frankly, I don't mind admitting that my head isn't very far above water right this minutes. For the last two years I've gone behind."

"I know yuh have," Shorty said thoughtfully. "An' I know it's goin' to hurt yuh to have to fall back on an old gravel bed to pull yuh out. But that's about what's goin' to happen, Frank. You got water here. Plenty of it.

"Half the water that comes down out of the mountains in your creek is goin' to waste. We need water. We got to have it to work out claims. I think mebbe we can make a deal."

"Do you think it possible to get the water over there?" Lansdowne asked.

"I know it," Shorty said with assurance. "I surveyed it years ago, when I first got int'rested in this phantom river layout. By tappin' the creek up there at the head o' the canyon, we can git jest enough fall to clear the ridge. Then it's plain sailin'."

They talked and planned for hours. When it got too cold out on the porch, they went into the big dining room and Shorty spread out papers on the table and drew plans of a flume line and figured costs of digging ditches and building flume.

Money was the big problem. Shorty and Barry were almost penniless. But with the proof that their claims were rich Shorty insisted that it would not be hard to find capital for development.

Lansdowne was interested. Though his heart and soul were in the cattle business, he realized all too well that the Lazy B could not last much longer. He saw opportunity and he put out a hand to grasp it.

"Shorty, how much money do you have to have to put your mine on a paying basis?" he asked.

The little prospector went to work with his stub of pencil. He worked silently, eagerly, with fingers that trembled a little. At last he announced with a bland smile:

"By skimpin' an' scrapin' an' workin' like blazes ourselves, we can put her over with sixty-five hundred dollars."

Lansdowne looked startled. "I had no idea——" he began, and broke off.

Taking Shorty's pencil, he went to work himself. Five minutes later he straightened up. His face was a little white. He looked like a man half frightened. His voice was low and clear.

"By selling such of my cattle as are salable and by scraping up every cent I could raise, I could let you have six thousand dollars."

Shorty jerked erect in surprise. "I never figgered that you——"

Lansdowne smiled feebly. "I know you didn't, Shorty. I am a cattleman and you never thought that I would return to mining. But—I have to turn to something, the way things are going. Maybe"—his eyes were far away and glistening—"maybe this is opportunity knocking."

Shorty was beaming. "I know it is, Frank. I know what I got over there in Phantom Canyon. Give us any kind of a break, an' we'll all be rich men inside of a year. An' there ain't nobody in the world I'd rather see come in with us. How about you, 'Tex?' "

"I think it's mighty fine o' Mr. Lansdowne to offeh us the money. If the claims prove up afteh we prospect 'em carefully I'm all fo' goin' ahead an' takin' him in as our pardneh."

"You bet!" the little prospector cried eagerly. "We'll give yuh a third interest, Frank, fer your water an' the six thousan'. It'll be tough sleddin' to git by on that. But we can do it if we have to."

Lansdowne sighed and made a gesture of finality. He sighed, ruefully. "It will be sink or swim for me, Shorty. Success on the one hand, utter and complete failure on the other."

"We ain't thinkin' o' failure, Frank," the old prospector asserted confidently.

"No, I know you aren't thinking of it, Shorty. You and Barry are alone in the world. You have no one dependent on you. It is a little different with me. I have my wife and Esther. If anything goes wrong—if we fail——" The cattleman's voice broke.

"We ain't goin' to fail," Shorty cried, and thumped the table.

For the first time in many months Tex Barry slept between clean, white sheets that night. The cool breeze, fragrant with the perfume of the sage, stirred the curtains of his open window. It was nice to sleep in a real bed again, in a real house. And yet he would have gladly given up that privilege, could he, instead of Tom Kent, have been the one to take Esther Lansdowne to the dance in Caliente.

The future lay before him, rosy-tinted. Success and wealth seemed just around the corner. Still, he wasn't happy. He couldn't quite banish the picture he held of Esther and Tom Kent, riding serenely and happily down the road to Caliente. And he couldn't quite forget Frank Lansdowne's white, drawn face as the old cattleman had said: "If anything goes wrong—if we fail——"

Tex Barry was worried and apprehensive. He could stand failure; he had invested only a few hundred dollars, a few months of his time. Shorty, too, could stand it, for he was alone in the world.

Frank Lansdowne was different. The cattleman was old; he had a wife and a daughter. Barry was a little appalled at the thought of what failure would mean to Frank Lansdowne.

Tex slept fitfully, and dreamed of "Hefty" Hogan and his band of outlaws and awoke with the feeling that, sooner or later, Phantom Canyon would ring to the sound of deadly combat.

CHAPTER XVII.

DISILLUSIONED.

WITH the claims safely recorded, as they learned on Esther's return shortly after noon the following day, Shorty and Tex went back to work. They repaired their tent and made camp again. For more than three weeks they dug in prospect holes and panned samples and went about the business of thoroughly proving their claims.

Hogan and his gang, thwarted for the time, had apparently returned to their stamping ground in the Black Butte country. But their threat, their ever-

present threat, they left behind to worry the partners.

There was the usual excitement attending a new gold strike. Though the last mine in that section of Arizona had been abandoned years before, though the country was now given over solely to sheep and cattle, the long dormant gold lust was again alive.

Men rode out from Caliente, staked claims, sometimes miles away from the strike and geologically destined to be barren, and returned to town to sell them. Worthless claims changed hands by the dozen and men swarmed over the hillsides from dawn until dark.

The excitement was short-lived. The only gold seemed to be on the claims that Shorty and Barry had staked. And within two weeks the partners again had Phantom Canyon to themselves.

Frank Lansdowne came over every day. At first he tried to help them at the tedious task of digging and sampling. But Tex and Shorty discouraged him. He was too old a man to wield a pick in that broiling sun.

Esther, too, visited them nearly every day. Barry enjoyed her good-humored banter. In the mornings he found himself keeping watch of the trail to the Lazy B, waiting eagerly for a first glimpse of the buckskin and the trim little figure which bestrode him so well. On the days that she did not come the sun always seemed hotter, the work always harder, and night always found him more weary.

Esther, on her visits to Phantom Canyon, found a dusty, sweat-grimed young man who usually met her sallies with a taciturn silence. Rarely did he unbend. Rarely did he seem even to be in a good humor. She found it hard to penetrate his reserve.

Yet he was always glad to see her, always sorry when she departed. He interested the girl, possibly because she did not understand him. How could she know that his reticence was only the natural result of bashfulness in her presence? How could she know that he revered the very ground she walked on?

Tom Kent, too, was a frequent visitor at the claims. He came usually with Esther, but on occasion he dropped by alone. From him Barry learned that the murder charge had been dropped.

Tex found him friendly, cordial, always good-humored. He liked the man, because his personality was compelling. But he hated him, too, because he knew that he loved Esther Lansdowne.

After three weeks of the hardest work Barry had ever done in his life, Shorty announced one night that a further survey of the claims was a waste of time. The gold was there. They had proved it definitely. They faced only the task of getting it out.

After a long conference with Lansdowne, they decided to plunge into the building of the ditch and flume at once. Partnership papers were drawn up and the cattleman was given a one-third interest in the claims in return for six thousand dollars in cash and half the water in the Lazy B creek.

Materials were hauled in from Caliente, laborers were recruited, and the task of building a half mile of flume and nearly four miles of ditch was begun in earnest. Because they worked hard themselves and drove their men from dawn until dark, they were able to finish the work in nine weeks.

Of course, it was not a large ditch and it was not built with an eye to permanence. That would all come later, when they had more money.

A few days before the ditch was completed, Shorty went down to Kingman and returned with four former cronies who were to constitute the crew of the mine.

"Hoggy" Aires, the cook, was a huge, fat fellow, with a whining manner and the culinary ability of a first-class hotel chef. Andy Summers was a little man,

rather ratty in appearance. Despite his size, he had a fighting heart; he'd take on his weight in wild cats any day, just for the fun of the battle.

The other two members of the crew were "Bull" Norris, a big, beefy person with a nasal voice and a childlike pink face, and "Slim" Cockrane, a lanky fellow who seemed all arms and legs but who could make a four-inch stream of water talk in terms of gravel yardage.

They constituted an illy assorted foursome, these rough, hard-bitten products of the mining camps. But Shorty Metcalf swore by them, as well as at them. He asserted that four better workers nor four better fighters could not be found in the State.

There came a night at last when the sluice boxes were in place, the water was in the ditch and everything was in readiness to start work on the following morning. The little camp in Phantom Canyon was tense with excitement. Shorty's crew might have owned the mine themselves, so eager were they to start work.

Tex Barry wandered restlessly around the workings, while the crew and Shorty and Lansdowne sat in the small bunk house and discussed the future in ardent voices. Tex was worried. The strain of the long weeks of toil had told on him.

The partners were down to their last dollar. Worse, they were already in debt to merchants in Caliente for supplies to carry them over the first month's operations. The next few weeks would tell the story. Failure or success. Which would it be?

Barry thought of Lansdowne. To the kind, trusting old cattleman, failure spelled disaster, utter ruin.

He had not seen Esther for several days. They had seemed months. He realized suddenly how necessary she had become to him.

He had not called upon her. Not once during the long, toilsome weeks since he had met her had he gone out of his way to see her.

The full moon was high. The night was cool and pleasant, after the stifling heat of the day. And down in the meadow below the water hole was Ladybug, restless and high-spirited after weeks of idleness. Why not?

Fifteen minutes later Tex was riding swiftly up the trail toward the Lazy B. Cool wind was on his face. A fast horse was under him. The vast expanse of moonlit desert and butte and mountain stretched out before him—and Esther Lansdowne only a few miles away. Tex was happy.

He found Mrs. Lansdowne alone on the porch of the Lazy B ranch house. Now that he was here, Barry's old bashfulness came over him.

He stood around and talked for a while, talked of the mine, and the work that was to begin on the morrow, even talked of the weather.

At last, summoning his courage, he asked with attempted casualness: "Is Miss Estheh home this evenin'?"

Mrs. Lansdowne smiled faintly. "She just went down to the barn, Tex. The night was so nice she thought she'd go for a ride."

"Then if you'll excuse me, I'll go ridin', too," said Tex, and hurried down the path to the road.

He reached it just in time. Esther was riding by in the direction of town. Tex leaped astride the chestnut and drew up beside her.

"Well," she said, reining in with some surprise. "If it isn't Tex Barry? Where in the world are you going?"

"Well, wheah are you goin'?" Tex countered.

"I'm going for a ride."

"Then I reckon that's wheah I'm goin'."

"Really! You don't mean to say you came over here to go riding with me."

"That's right!"

"You honor me, Mr. Barry. Let's

see, you've been in this country some six or seven months, haven't you? And this is the first time you have ever walked a step out of your way to see me. I can't tell you how flattered I am."

"Aw, shucks, li'l' lady, you know how busy I've been," Tex protested. "Besides, 'bout every time you see me you start callin' me down fo' somethin'."

Esther laughed gayly. "Do I, Tex? Well, you poor abused little boy! I'll never call you down again."

"Is that a promise?" Tex asked seriously.

"Absolutely."

"Then you're a sweet li'l' girl. An' I think if you lived up to a promise like that, you'd make a right good li'l' wife. I've been wonderin' fo' a long time if you wouldn't marry me."

The girl's slender face sobered. Her blue eyes wide, her red lips parted a little, she stared at Tex. The man's eyes were on the pommel of his saddle. He, too, was very sober.

"Tex!" Her voice was low and soft. "Are you in earnest?"

His eyes met hers and he nodded slowly. "Ma'am, I was nevah mo' in earnest in my life."

While their gazes were still locked, the swift clatter of hoofs sounded in their ears and a flying horseman swept around a turn in the road. He drew up beside them and when the wind swept the dust away, they saw that it was Tom Kent.

"Hello, everybody!" he greeted them airily. "You must have had the same idea I did. What a night! What a night!"

"It is glorious," Esther responded.

"Where are you bound?" the sheriff asked.

"Esther waved her hand. "No place. Any place. Just riding."

"May I join you?"

"Of course."

And the moonlight grew less brilliant for Tex Barry. The odor of the sage became hateful. His body grew tired and his shoulders drooped a little. He took no part in the conversation as they rode along.

A creature of moods, he found himself disheartened and alone. Alone, though Esther was so near that he could have touched her with his hand.

"Well, folks," he said finally, "I reckon I bettah get back to the mine. They's work to be done befo' we can start sluicin' to-morrow."

"I'm sorry you have to leave so soon, Tex," said Esther.

Barry's eyes met hers. Did she mean it? Was she really sorry, or was she only being polite? He couldn't tell.

"I'm sorry, too," he said quietly. "Good night, Estheh. "Good night, seh."

He swung Ladybug around and cantered swiftly away.

A lone horseman stood on a high ridge, a black silhouette against the moon. A lone horseman with sagging shoulders and weary lines about his long, slim body. He sat his saddle motionlessly for a time, gazing down at the valley far below.

Wide fields, green and cool in the moonlight. The Lazy B creek, a slender, winding ribbon of silver. The black bulk of the ranch buildings. Yellow lights twinkling up at him.

A streak of white that led off to the east and disappeared in the blue haze of distance. And on it, very close together, two tiny, moving clouds of dust.

Tex watched those clouds of dust for a long time. Then with a weary shrug of his wide shoulders he turned away. Hope was dead in his breast. What chance had he?

There was Tom Kent, handsome and poised, well-mannered and polished—a gentleman. Though he might be crooked, and there was doubt about that, he was still a gentleman. A fitting mate for such a woman as Esther Lansdowne.

And there was Tex Barry, unschooled

and a bit uncouth—nothing polished about him. He had learned his manners in a cattle camp. He spoke like a ruffian and often acted like one. He was crude in the bargain. She had told him so, before she had known him five minutes. Crude and unschooled and homely.

Weary and disheartened, Tex rode slowly down the trail toward Phantom Canyon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HINTS OF SUCCESS.

IT was the day of the first clean-up. Two weeks had passed. They had been weeks in which the three partners' hopes had risen high a dozen times, and had been plunged to the depths just as many.

A hundred things had gone wrong. Aggravation and delay and disappointment had met them on every hand.

But they had battled through. Andy Summers and Bull Norris and Slim Cockrane seemed to thrive on a steady diet of trouble. Working day and night, overcoming difficulty after difficulty, they at last had the mine working smoothly.

The water was coming over the ditch line, the powerful "Giant" was washing the gravel into the sluice boxes, the riffles were catching the gold.

At noon that day Shorty decided they would make their first clean-up. The water was shut off and with Barry and Lansdowne and the crew looking on and shouting suggestions, Shorty descended into the sluice boxes and began the task of collecting the gold from the riffles.

There was a surprising amount of it, more than they had hoped for. When Shorty had completed his task, taken the accumulation of fine grains and nuggets to the bunk house and weighed it, he turned with gleaming eyes to the tense little circle of men that stood behind him.

"Boys, they's just a little more'n a hundred an' sixty ounces. That means around three thousand dollars. It ain't no fortune. It won't do any more'n pay our debts an' buy supplies an' one thing another fer the next month's run.

"But if we've took out three thousand in two weeks, with all the trouble an' shut-downs we've had, you can figger for yourselves what we're goin' to do when we settle down to real work. Frank, how's it goin' to feel to be rich again?'

The old cattleman's eyes were misty. "Shorty, I can't tell you what this means to me," he said in a husky voice.

Shorty slapped Barry across the shoulders. "What do yuh say, Tex?" he beamed. "Think you'll ever be sorry that yuh tied up with me?"

"Neveh, Sho'ty," Barry vowed. "You sho' knew what you was talkin' about when you said they was a phantom riveh in this ol' canyon. I reckon the people that's laughed at you all these yeahs are goin' to change theah tune now."

The men laughed and joked and made merry. It was a big day for every one. Yet Tex Barry, somehow, could not fall into the spirit of it. He might be a rich man, potentially, but what did that mean? Of what use was gold? It couldn't banish loneliness.

He turned away at last and walked out into the broiling sun. The canyon stretched out before him, white and hot and barren. He stared up it, in the direction of the Lazy B.

His thoughts were of Esther. It had been days since she had visited the workings. He didn't blame her for not coming oftener. He had been silent and taciturn, almost sullen, when she dropped over the last time. He hadn't meant to be that way; he just couldn't seem to help it.

She might have ridden over to-day, he told himself regretfully. She had known they were going to clean up. Maybe——

He stared up the canyon. His keen eyes, searching, made out a lone horseman just breasting the summit of the farthest ridge. For a moment he was outlined sharply against the sky. Then he dropped over the ridge and disappeared.

"Now who was that?" Tex queried, half aloud. "He was headin' west, in the direction o' the Black Butte country. H'm! I don't like the look o' that."

He went back into the bunk house. "Mr. Lansdowne, would any o' yo' ridehs be cuttin' oveh the west ridge about now?" he queried.

The cattleman shook his head. "No. They are all down at the ranch to-day. Why?"

"I jest seen a rideh headin' across that ridge," Barry answered.

Lansdowne looked at Shorty, and Shorty looked at Tex. The faces of the two older men were suddenly grim and serious.

"Do yuh think it might be——" the little prospector began.

Barry shrugged. "Theah's no tellin' who it was, Sho'ty. He was too far away fo' me to reco'nize. Though I do believe he was ridin' a black horse."

"Hefty Hogan rides a black horse," Lansdowne reminded.

Shorty nodded. "Yeh. I rec'lect that hoss mighty well."

"What do you reckon we'd betteh do?" Tex queried. "It's too late now to get this stuff to the express office. It'd be closed by the time we could get to town an' that sour ol' express agent wouldn't open it fo' the President of the United States. An' if that was Hogan, or one o' his men, he prob'ly seen us clean up. They might o' been watchin' fo' jest that thing."

"Why not bring the gold over to the Lazy B?" Lansdowne suggested.

"No, there ain't no need o' that," Shorty shook his head. "If there was trouble, I wouldn't want your womenfolks mixed up in it. No, we'll keep it right here. If we can't take care of it, nobody can. I reckon these four bohunks o' mine can stand off Hogan's gang or anybody else."

"Bohunks, huh!" growled little Andy Summers. "You jest show us trouble an' you won't call us bohunks no more. You'll call us first-class fightin' men. How about it, Bull?"

Bull Norris spat accurately through the open door. "Betcha life, Andy," he replied in his high, nasal voice. "We'll take on this Hogan hombre or anybody else. We ain't even partic'lar."

"You bet," drawled Slim Cockrane. "We'll take 'em on."

It was arranged that the gold should be kept in the bunk house under guard that night. And, because no one wanted to chance being asleep if trouble started, it was further agreed that all of them would stay awake until dawn.

Lansdowne went home shortly before sundown. With six armed men standing guard over the gold, he felt he had little cause for uneasiness.

Hoggy Aires outdid himself that evening. Considering the dearth of supplies on hand, the dinner that he served was little short of remarkable. The men ate heartily.

When Shorty at last pushed his plate away and wiped his wrinkled brown hand across his mouth, he remarked: "Hoggy, how do yuh think we're goin' to stay awake all night after eatin' a dinner like that?"

The fat cook raised a finger to his lips; his small blue eyes were gleaming brightly. "S-s-s-sh! Poker!"

Four heads jerked up in unison. Tex grinned. He knew that next to eating, these men would rather play poker than do anything else in the world.

For two weeks they had been denied this universal pastime. A man can hardly work fourteen hours a day in that blistering sun, play poker half the night and get up at four o'clock in the morning.

"Aw right," said Shorty. "Poker she is. Hurry up with your dishes, Hoggy."

"Dishes be durned!" the huge cook cried. "I ain't doin' no dishes to-night."

"Suit yerself. Let's go over to the bunk house an' git goin'."

The six men, with Shorty carrying the small canvas sack that had not been out of his sight since he had filled it with gold that afternoon, trooped out of the little cook house and into the bunk house. Wood was brought in for the stove, for it would be cold before morning; lamps were lighted, the door was locked and barred, blankets were nailed over the windows.

"There!" said Shorty, surveying the room. "I reckon nobody is goin' to git into this room without us gittin' plenty o' warning. Contrary to the latest rules, gentlemen, six-guns will be worn at the poker table. Rifles will also be handy. Draw up an' cut for deal. You playin', Tex?"

"No, don't reckon I'll join yuh to-night."

Shorty looked at him keenly. "Why not, Tex?"

"Oh, I dunno. I jest don't feel up to it. I've been feelin' kinda in the dumps lately."

Shorty rose from his chair. "Deal 'em, somebody. I'll be along in a minute." He took Barry by the arm and walked him to the far end of the bunk house. "You worried about that gal?" he queried in a low voice.

Tex jerked away. "You go to the devil, Sho'ty!"

"Now, none o' that, son. I've noticed yuh ain't been yourself lately. But I never paid much attention to yuh. Been too busy with other things. What's the matter? She givin' yuh a bad time, ain't she?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Tex answered with reluctance.

"In love with her?"

Barry flushed and looked away. "Yeh," he admitted. "Reckon I am."

"Asked her to marry yuh?" Shorty persisted.

"Yeh."

Shorty looked startled. "Say, you're a faster worker than I give yuh credit fer bein'. What'd she say?"

"Neveh said nothin'."

"Never said nothin'! Why not?"

"We was out ridin'. I'd jest asked her, kind o' jokin'like, when here comes Tom Kent ridin' up. She neveh had time to answeh. He went ridin' with us an' I got disgusted an' came home."

Shorty swore. Had any one else called Tex the names Shorty did, there would have been war. But Shorty was privileged, and Tex writhed.

"Why, you blankety-blanked fool! You got about as much courage as a prairie dog! Why don't yuh put up a fight? Why don't yuh go after her? Think she's comin' over here an' throw herself at your feet?"

"No, reckon she ain't," said Tex, very miserable.

"Then clear out o' here right this minute. Git your hoss an' move your dumb carcass to the Lazy B. Move, yuh double-blanked fool!"

"But she wouldn't have me, Sho'ty," Tex protested. "I'm only——"

"Now don't go runnin' yourself down!" Shorty snapped. "You're a blamed sight better than that two-fer-a-nickel sheriff with his tin star. And if Esther can't see yuh are, she's blind. Git out!"

"But you need me heah."

"Need nothin'. If the five o' us can't take care of this gold, I don't guess you'd be much use either. Now move!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A BLOW IN THE DARK.

TEX moved, more to escape further humiliation at the hands of Shorty than anything else.

He rode dutifully over the hill, growing more shy and uncertain of himself

all the time, and presented himself at the door of the Lazy B ranch house. His knock brought Frank Lansdowne. The old cattleman looked startled when he saw Barry's face.

"Oh, it's you, Tex. My heavens, boy! Is anything wrong?"

"Yeh—no—yeh—— Well no, they ain't nothin' wrong, Mr. Lansdowne,' Tex answered at last, blushing furiously.

"Nothing wrong at the mine?"

"No, not a thing. I jest came over to see Miss Estheh."

"Oh," Lansdowne grinned and showed his relief. "Come in, Tex."

The three members of the Lansdowne family were sitting around the table in the big living-room reading the accumulated newspapers of a week. Both Esther and her mother greeted Tex friendlily.

The young man tried to talk and found nothing to say. Lansdowne and his wife helped him, now and then exchanging sly smiles, but Esther went on with her reading.

After perhaps half an hour the cattleman and his wife excused themselves. Esther glanced at Tex. She was not smiling; indeed her small mouth was set rather grimly.

"Can I give you something to read?" she asked very coolly.

Tex shook his head, growing more miserable every second. "No, ma'am. I don't reckon I care to read."

"Then how can I entertain you?"

"You don't need to entehtain me, Estheh. I—I——"

"Yes?" Her voice was still cool and distant.

Tex thought of beating a hasty retreat. But if he did, what could he say to Shorty? Shorty would insist on knowing what had happened and he could not lie to him. Well, better have it over and get back to the mine.

Tex took a deep breath. "That time we was ridin'," he began, "I was askin' you——"

Esther's voice was low and clear. "Yes, Tex?"

"I was askin' you"—and then, almost as though it were one word—"if-you-wouldn't-marry-me!"

Tex swallowed hard; now that it was over, he felt better. She could hardly do more than show him the door. Instead she regarded him with blue eyes that were softly glowing.

A faint smile twisted the corners of her mouth. She seemed hardly to be breathing. But Tex did not see these things; his face was red with embarrassment and his gaze was on the floor.

Suddenly a small bundle of femininity was in his arms. Tex blinked and gulped and didn't know what to do with it. So he kissed it fairly on the lips, and with considerable skill for an amateur.

"Oh, Tex! You foolish, bashful old dear! How blind you've been!"

Tex was still dazed. Fighting for time to recover and still not knowing quite what to do with the girl in his arms, he kissed her again.

"Me? Blind?" he stammered.

"Yes, dear. You've been as blind as a bat. Couldn't you tell that I loved you from the first day I saw you?"

"No! You didn't!" Barry exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, I did. Every minute. And you've made me so unhappy."

Tex gasped his astonishment. "Me? Made you unhappy?"

"Yes. By being so cold and unfriendly and standoffish. I knew it was only bashfulness. I knew you cared for me. But what could I do? I could hardly go over there to the mine and throw myself at your feet."

Tex grinned. "That was jest what Sho'ty told me to-night."

She drew away from him and looked into his eyes, frowning. "Shorty!"

"Yeh. He jumped me to-night. Said he knew somethin' was wrong. He made me tell him. Then he made me

come hot-footin' it oveh heah to see you."

"Dear old Shorty! I'll kiss him the very next time I see him."

Tex chuckled, still a little uncertain, still a little dazed. "I don't know but what I'll kiss him myself. I'm that grateful to him. Gee! but I been a fool. I ain't meant to be unfriendly an' stand-offish, Estheh. But, somehow, I jest couldn't seem to talk to you. Reckon you meant too much to me."

"Do I, Tex?"

"Everything," he said simply, and then lifted her and got to his feet. "I got to get out. I'll faint if I don't. You've upset me to beat the band."

"Me? Why, Tex!"

"Yeh. I don't know whetheh I'm afoot or hossback. I got to get out wheah I can breathe. I got to ride. I got to think. I got to get away from heah befo' I wake up."

She shook her head and regarded him tenderly. "You won't wake up, Tex. I'll always love you."

"And I'll always love you, li'l' lady. An' I'd like to stay heah an' do nothin' but kiss you till kingdom come. Only I betteh get back to the mine. They may be somethin' doin' theah to-night an' I ought to be on hand."

"Tex! Do you really think that Hefty Hogan may cause you trouble to-night?"

Tex shrugged deprecatingly. "Naw, he cain't cause us no trouble to speak of. If he comes around that camp to-night, he'll jest get himself a nice dose o' lead. An' I want to be theah to help pump it into him. So I reckon I'll run along."

He kissed her tenderly and then, afraid of breaking the spell, he dove out of the door and onto his horse. Esther stood on the porch and waved to him as he started up the hill.

"Come and see me to-morrow," she called.

"Honey, I sho' will!" Tex called back.

And never dreamed that many long, heart-breaking days would pass before he again saw Esther Lansdowne.

Barry's heart was singing as he rode back to the mine. No one in the world, he told himself, could be more happy than he. He rode on air.

The world was good. No cloud crossed his horizon, for his thoughts were far from Hefty Hogan and the Black Butte gang. Mercifully, he never suspected how short-lived his new-found happiness would be.

What a fool he had been, he reflected. What bitter misery he had caused himself!

He reached the mine, turned the mare loose in the meadow below the water hole, and went back to the bunk house. He pounded wildly on the door. "It's me! Tex!" he shouted.

He heard the grind of the lock and an instant later Shorty's peering head showed behind a narrow crack. "Why all the noise, Tex?" the little prospector growled. "There's people asleep down in Caliente."

"I feel like wakin' 'em up!" Tex beamed.

Shorty let him in and carefully locked the door. Then he turned and scanned his partner. His thin hand shot out and gripped Barry's.

"Tex, was I right?"

"Right as a dollah, Sho'ty!" the Texan grinned happily.

"Good! Now you come over here an' sit by my chair. I need a change o' luck. Unless you can bring it, I might as well cash my checks an' quit the game. I'm already out more'n a hundred dollars o' money I ain't even got."

"No, yuh don't!" Hoggy Aires scowled. "If you do anything, Tex Barry, you'll go over to the cook house an' rustle a little grub. I'm gittin' powerful hungry."

"Same here," came the piping voice of Bull Norris. "I move we eat."

"Second the commotion!" Slim Cockrane cried.

Shorty scowled. "Huh! That's all you fellers think about. Eat, eat, eat! It'll take all the mineral we can git out o' this mine to buy grub to feed yuh. Wonder yuh wouldn't think o' somethin' else besides eatin' once in a while. An' by the way, Tex, when yuh go after that grub jest look around an' see if there's any o' them beans left from supper."

Laughingly, Barry went to the door and started to unlock it. Shorty leaped to his side.

"Wait a minute, there, Tex! We ain't takin' no chances. Jest wait till the boys douse the lights. Don't never know what might be hangin' around outside. Best to play safe."

When the lights had been blown out, Shorty cautiously opened the door and Tex stepped out in the darkness. He heard the door close behind him, heard the lock slide home. He stood still for a moment, while his eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

Then he walked over to the cook house, pushed open the door and stepped inside. He was reaching for a match when he heard a board creak. He froze in his tracks and his hand went swiftly to his gun. Then, just as he was on the point of crying out, a stunning blow struck him on the side of the head. He went down, and out.

CHAPTER XX.

A FIGHTING WAGER.

"SHE'S open fer five," said Slim Cockrane.

Shorty scowled at the tall man. "Who yuh think yuh're playin' with? Millionaires?"

Slim shrugged. "I got 'em, boy. Better keep yer money if yuh don't want to git yer fingers burned."

"Yeh? Think I'm afraid o' yuh?" Shorty growled. "Aw right! I'll see that five an' boost yuh five more. What do yuh think o' that?" He tossed in two blue chips.

"I'm out," Hoggy Aires announced.

"Me too," said Bull Norris.

"Too steep fer me." Little Andy Summers tossed up his cards.

"Fair enough," Slim nodded. "We kept out the grocery clerks. "I'll see that five, Shorty, and boost it five more."

"Called." The old prospector tossed in another blue chip.

"How many cards yuh want?" Andy asked.

"I'll keep these," Slim grinned.

"Huh! Think yer smart, don't yuh?" Shorty grunted. "Openin' under the gun with a pat hand. Aw right! I got a pat hand myself. What yuh bettin'?"

"Oh, ten bucks to start her off," said Slim airily.

"See yuh an' raise yuh ten!" Shorty snapped.

The players heard a sharp knock on the door. Hoggy Aires eased his huge bulk out of his chair. "Ah, grub! Get that hand over, boys. Here's Tex with the eats."

"Up another ten," said Slim, unmindful of the proximity of food.

Hoggy started toward the door. The other players leaned closer to the table. Shorty wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"I'll see that, Slim," said the little prospector tensely, "and ten more."

"Whew!" Slim squirmed in his chair. His face was red and his eyes were bright. "Well, can't quit now. I'll call. What yuh got?"

The two men started to lay down their hands. At that moment Hoggy unlocked the door and looked over his shoulder to see the two hands spread out on the table. The door swung open. Even then Hoggy did not realize the proximity of danger.

"Wow!" the big cook cried. "Four ladies. Shorty, you sure sunk your spurs into him——"

"Keep yer hands off yer guns, gentlemen!" a deep voice snapped from the doorway.

The five men turned as one, just in time to see Hefty Hogan striding into the room, a revolver in each hand. He was closely followed by half a dozen other men, all of them armed.

"Better put 'em up!" Hogan advised.

Their faces gone suddenly white, the men stared dazedly at the intruders and raised their hands. Shorty cursed with quiet helplessness. The others did not speak.

"Joe, you collect the artillery," the big outlaw ordered. "An' search 'em careful. An' mind, you guys, no funny business! We got yuh covered an' yuh know blamed well we ain't afraid to shoot. Go to work, Joe."

The man addressed as Joe, whom Shorty recognized as Hogan's companion on the night they had tried to make him reveal the location of the claims, went from man to man and collected their firearms.

"Now pass me that canvas sack that's under the table," Hogan commanded.

Shorty groaned audibly. The big outlaw laughed.

"Thought yuh was pretty smart that night yuh got away from me, didn't yuh?" Hogan sneered. "Well, yuh ain't feelin' so smart right now, are yuh? Feelin' pretty sick, huh? Well, yer goin' to feel a whole lot sicker before we git through with yuh. The five of yuh can march outside now."

"Where's my pardner?" Shorty demanded angrily.

"Sound asleep," Hogan leered. "An' not liable to wake up fer a long, long time."

"If yuh've killed him——" Shorty began hoarsely.

"If I've killed him, he's dead. An' that's that," Hogan snapped. "Out yuh go! An' make it snappy before my trigger finger gits nervous."

The five crestfallen men were marched out into the cold darkness of the moonless night. One of the outlaws met Hogan in the doorway of the bunk house. "The Texan came to," he announced.

"Yeh? Then I didn't hit him as hard as I thought I did. Bring him over."

Silent and angry, and still reeling a little, Tex was brought over and thrust into the little group of men covered by the guns of Hogan's desperadoes.

"I'm sorry, Sho'ty," he murmured miserably.

" 'Tain't your fault, Tex," the little prospector said. "The rest of us are as much to blame as you. We jest didn't tend to business, that's all. Got too interested in a damn poker game. Gosh, I hate to think o' pore old Frank Lansdowne. This'll break him."

Horses were being led over from where they had been hidden. Cinches were being adjusted, canteens filled. It was apparent that preparations were being made for a long ride. Tex watched them and, his brain still a bit dazed from the blow on his head, wondered where they were to be taken.

Hogan slouched over to the silent little group. "Feelin' better, kid?" he asked, with a grin.

"Who the devil wants to know?" Tex snarled.

Hogan laughed. "Still as cocky as ever, eh? Guess I didn't hit yuh hard enough. Want another smack alongside the dome?"

"You're damned brave, ain't yuh?" Barry sneered. "Standin' theah with a gun in both hands. I jest wondeh if yuh'd be so brave if we was alone an' yuh didn't have a gun."

"What you tryin' to do?" the huge outlaw growled. "Kid me along?"

"No, I'm not tryin' to kid yuh along," the Texan snapped. "I'm jest tellin' yuh that if yuh didn't have a gun in yo' hand, yuh'd be a dirty, yelleh coward. Now think that oveh!"

Hogan took a step forward. "I'm thinkin' it over. An' I'm thinkin' that you need a damned good beatin' to put yuh in yer place."

"Yeh? Think yo' man enough to give it to me?"

"Yuh're blamed well right I'm man enough," Hogan cried angrily. "Here, Joe! Hold these guns. An' keep them other hombres out o' the way. I'm goin' to teach this young sprout to keep his lip to himself."

"Aw listen, Hefty!" Joe protested. "This ain't no time to be startin' anything like that. We got a long way to go to-night an' the sooner we git started, the better off we'll be. It ain't safe to stay around here."

"Why not?" Hogan scoffed. "What're we afraid of? Who's goin' to start anything with us? We got the sheriff sewed up, ain't we?"

"Sh-sh, Hefty! Don't spill everything yuh know."

Hogan, Tex realized now, must be a little drunk. Either that or he was possessed of a monumental conceit, an ungovernable temper that, once aroused, made him heedless of what he said or did.

"We got the sheriff sewed up, ain't we?" Tex stored those words away in the back of his brain. Regardless of what happened now, Hogan's assertion might be a good thing to remember.

The Texan stood calmly while the big outlaw divested himself of his guns, his holsters and his chaps. Barry surveyed the other carefully. He'd weigh two hundred and twenty, possibly more.

His big, hard-muscled body didn't look to have an ounce of fat on it. He had a tremendous reach, too, and a short, thick neck and bulletlike head that looked as solid and impervious to punishment as an ivory billiard ball.

Tex did not quit or back down, though his head even now was none too clear and though he knew the other outweighed him a good forty pounds. Hogan, too, despite the fact that his men protested, declared his determination of putting "this damned young sprout" in his place.

"Tex, don't tangle with him," Shorty pleaded in an undertone. "It won't do any good. An' he'll half kill yuh. You ain't no match for a big bruiser."

The Texan's blood was up and he shook his head without responding.

"Now listen, Tex!" the little prospector pleaded huskily. "What good's it goin' to do to git yourself all beat up? They ain't nothin' in it. They ain't nothin' at stake."

"Let me take him on," big Bull Norris offered in his nasal voice. "I'll bet I could do him under."

"No, I'll fight my own battles," Tex said in a low, determined tone.

"Yer mighty right yuh will," Hogan snapped. "Step out here an' take yer medicine."

Tex took a pace or two forward. "What are we fightin' fo'?" he asked. "What's the stake?"

"Anything yuh want to put up," Hogan leered.

"All right. Put it this way: If you lick me, Sho'ty an' me an' the rest of us will do anything you say. The gold'll be yo's an' you'll be sittin' pretty. But if I lick you, you takes yo' gang an' cleahs out. How about that?"

"Say, you must think I'm nutty!" the big outlaw sneered. "I already got the gold an' got you birds where I want yuh. What's the use o' fightin' for somethin' I already got?"

"Oh," said Tex in silky tones, "you're afraid."

"Me? Afraid of a shrimp like you? Ha-ha! Know any more funny ones, sprout?"

Coolly and in a low voice that carried to every man, Barry said: "Yuh're a yelleh dog, Hogan! If yuh wasn't yuh'd take me up!"

Hogan rumbled with anger. "Yeller, huh?" he bellowed. "Yeller, huh? Aw right, I'll take yuh up on that. That proposition goes."

"Yo' word, Hogan?" Tex asked quietly.

"Yeh, on my word. Now step out here an' take the worst beatin' yuh ever took in yer life."

Tex stepped out into the wide circle made by the men. Hogan backed away for an instant. "Joe, you keep watch o' them hombres. Now!"

Tex knew he was playing a forlorn hope. He knew he had little chance of getting the better of the big, desert-hardened leader of the outlaws. But he thought of Esther Lansdowne; he thought of her father, the kind, trusting old cattleman who was counting on them; he thought of Shorty, about to lose the rewards of years of patient, plodding search.

He thought of those people. He realized that in him and in him alone lay their one hope. And his heart grew bitter and his muscles tensed to meet the bull-like charge of Hefty Hogan.

CHAPTER XXI.

A COWARDLY TRICK.

WITH his feet close together and his fists no higher than his waist, Tex Barry awaited Hogan's flying charge. He knew that his one chance lay in keeping away from the man, in cutting him to pieces with long range blows. Once Hogan got him into close quarters, the fight would be over.

Some one was holding a lantern. In its dim light Barry saw the convulsed face of the angry outlaw lunging toward him. He side-stepped, dodged Hogan's flying fist, and sent out a long left that caught the other on the mouth. With a roar that sounded more like a bull than a human being, Hogan swung around and rushed again.

And again Barry side-stepped, the other way this time, and lashed out with his right fist. His aim was true. It was a powerful blow, with Barry's every pound behind it, and it brought Hogan up short. The outlaw cursed and sprang at Tex with flailing fists.

Barry kept away from him, blocking his blows with his forearms, now and then driving in slashing rights and lefts that always found their mark on Hogan's unguarded face. The big outlaw knew nothing of boxing. He did not understand the first principles of protecting himself against a man who could box.

Guarding and blocking had always seemed to him a waste of time, for he had never met any one who could stand up under more than two or three of his sledge-hammer blows. It was the first time in his life that he had ever fought a man whom he could not hit. And the realization that, after several minutes of fighting, he had not landed one clean blow, drove him berserk with anger.

And Barry smiled grimly, danced away from the malletlike fists and kept slashing, slashing, slashing away at Hogan's bloody, hate-contorted countenance. He was playing the game perfectly, and playing it safely.

The more angry Hogan became, the better chance Tex would have. He taunted the big outlaw, in a voice that was cool and steady.

"Why don't yuh hit me, yuh yelleh dog! Hit me! Step up like a man an' make it interestin'. Wheah'd you learn to fight? In an old ladies' home?"

Hogan swore and dove at Tex again. This time Barry did not side-step. He ducked Hogan's lashing arms and drove his fist to the pit of the other's stomach. The outlaw sat down with an abruptness that was startling. It was probably the first time in a life of fighting that he had been knocked off his feet.

"Aw, git up an' fight like a man," Tex jeered. "If yo' goin' to sit down all the time, we might as well call it off."

Hogan was down no longer than a second. Then, wild with anger and humiliation, he was on his feet again and his great fists were lashing the air and

Tex was side-stepping and dodging and driving in an occasional blow. The outlaw's men were counseling caution.

"Take it easy, Hefty! Slow down! Git him in a clinch! Use yer left, yuh fool! Git that right up to pertect yer face! Aw, calm down, Hefty! Can't yuh see yuh won't git no place rushin' around like a locoed bull? Take it easy!"

Hefty Hogan was far too furious to hear them. He was taking a beating. He knew it and the knowledge drove him mad. And the madder he got, the more recklessly he fought.

Shorty and his friends were cheering their champion wildly. Unmindful of the threatening guns around them, unmindful of Joe's terse commands to keep their mouths shut, they cheered every blow that Tex drove home. And in their small way helped along the rout of the enemy.

"Go git him, Tex! Atta boy! Wow! There goes a couple o' teeth! Knock the rest down his throat, Tex! Kill the yeller dog! Hogan, where'd you git the idea you could fight? Oh, boy, that shore was a neat one, Tex! Hit him again over that eye!"

Tex fought on. As yet his face was untouched. He had not received a single solid blow during the fight. But he was tiring. The swiftness of his movements was using up his strength.

Almost imperceptibly he was slowing down. The springiness was leaving his legs. His hands were beginning to feel heavy. He was breathing fast. And he knew that to slow down, to allow Hogan to get in close to him, would be fatal.

"Come on an' fight, yelleh dog!" he taunted. "Why don't yuh hit me? Want me to stop while yuh wipe out yo' eyes. How do them lips feel? Theah swollen up like a negro's. Betteh stop, big boy!"

Tex was fighting cautiously, conserving his strength. He never struck a blow unless he saw an opening and knew he could get his fist home.

Both Hogan's eyes had been cut and they were swelling fast. If he could hold out for five minutes more, Tex felt, he might be able to finish the big outlaw.

Hogan, though still wild with fury, was fighting more cautiously himself. His own weariness, paradoxical as it may seem, was working to his advantage. He was slowing down. He did not rush, bull-like and furious, at his opponent so often. His feet were growing heavy. They seemed slow and hard to move.

For the first time in the fight, Hogan got home a real blow. Leaping at Tex, he anticipated the other's quick sidestep and lashed out sidewise with his fist. It was not a hard blow, for his weight was not behind it, but it caught Barry off balance and knocked him to his knees.

Tex knew the manner of man he was fighting. He knew he could expect no quarter, knew that a fighter like Hogan would as quickly strike a man with his boots as with his fists. So he rolled agilely aside, leaped out of range of the charging outlaw and jumped to his feet.

Knowing that he could not hold out much longer, that very soon his weariness would slow him down until he would be an easy mark for Hogan's blows, Tex began maneuvering for a knock-out. He played his opponent carefully, getting himself between Hogan and the lantern. Then, sparring cautiously for an opening, he waited.

The opening came, as he knew it would. Hogan swung his left. The blow fell short and threw him off balance.

Tex saw his chance and, with all the vicious power of his hundred and eighty pounds, drove his right straight from the shoulder to Hogan's jaw. The outlaw's knees doubled up and he fell forward on his face.

Shorty and his men were cheering wildly, unmindful of the threat of Joe's

gun. The outlaws were staring dazedly at their fallen leader.

It seemed impossible that this tall, rather thin young man could have knocked him out. But out Hogan was, though not for more than a moment or two.

Then he clambered weakly to his feet and surged toward Barry, cursing through swollen, bleeding lips. Tex side-stepped and swung again. And again Hogan went down. He stayed down longer this time. Tex was beginning to think the big man was out for good.

But Hogan got to his feet finally. He shook his head from side to side and lurched toward Barry, reeling.

Tex squared off, drew his fist back for the final knock-out. Every ounce of his strength was going into that blow. If it landed, Hefty Hogan would go down and he would stay down.

But the blow never landed. One of Hogan's men, seeing the situation, caught Barry's arm just as he was about to unleash his fist. Instead of striking Hogan, Hogan struck him. He had no chance to dodge or side-step. The outlaw's big fist caught him on the point of the jaw and knocked him down.

Dazed by the blow but not completely out, seething with anger at the unfair tactics that had been used against him, Tex started to get to his feet. Hogan was on him, smothering him to the ground with his heavy body, flailing his head and shoulders with his huge fists.

Lying on his side, furious now, Tex returned blow for blow. No chance to get to his feet, for Hogan had caught him by the belt and was holding him to the ground with one hand while he rained blows with the other. And so, like two crazed wild cats in a death struggle, they rolled about on the ground and fought with insensate fury.

The circle of men, peering eagerly at the combatants through the cloud of dust that arose, saw suddenly that Tex Barry was getting the better of the struggle. His blows, instead of weakening, were becoming more vicious, more calculated, more punishing.

Just as when he had been on his feet, he struck only when he saw an opening and he struck hard. No wasted effort, no wild flailing of fists. Slowly and deliberately and carefully he was beating his big opponent into insensibility.

Hogan's movements were becoming futile. One hand still locked in Barry's belt, the other swung weakly and blindly, meeting the empty air or the ground more often than it met Tex. His blows, even when they landed, would hardly have hurt a child. He fought on, blinded by dust, and anger, and grew weaker every second.

Another minute or two and Hogan would have been out—not knocked out, but cut and bruised and beaten into insensibility. Which, after all, would have pleased Tex far more than to have knocked him cold with one hard punch on the point of the jaw.

Then the man known as Joe took matters into his own hands. Grasping his six-gun by the barrel, he walked deliberately over to the two struggling men. He raised his gun, waiting for an opening.

Shorty screamed and leaped forward. A fist knocked him back against Bull Norris. Half a dozen guns were suddenly aimed on the little group, keeping them in place.

"Tex! Look out!" Shorty cried at the top of his voice.

Tex never heard the warning. The butt of the six-shooter fell and he collapsed in a limp heap beside his big opponent. Hogan, far too dazed to know what had happened, too dazed even to know that Barry was unconscious, continued blindly with the fight.

Joe slipped his gun into his holster and caught Hogan by the arm. "Come on, Hefty!" he shouted, striving to pull him to his feet. "Come on! You've knocked

him out. Let him alone. Stand up there. He's out cold."

Hogan stumbled to his feet, reeled and would have fallen had not two of his men supported him. "Knew I could lick him," he muttered, half delirious with pain and rage. "Knew no young sprout could take my measure. Why, damn him——" He aimed a blow at Barry's motionless head.

With a wild shriek Shorty leaped past restraining hands like he had been shot out of a gun. His hard little fist struck Hogan on the jaw and knocked the big man flat.

"Knew yuh could lick him, did yuh?" Shorty screamed. "Yuh yeller dog, he had yuh out! He knocked you down three times. He'd have killed yuh if this skunk here hadn't hit Tex with his gun butt."

Hogan sat blinking on the ground while rough hands jerked Shorty off his feet and hurled him back among his friends.

"Easy now," Hoggy Aires counseled, wrapping his arms around the writhing little prospector and holding him tightly against his fat body. "Just keep your shirt on, Shorty. Yuh won't git no place fightin' these fellers. Take it easy, old son."

Shorty ceased to struggle, though he still hurled curses and maledictions upon the bowed head of the fallen Hogan. The latter sat on the ground for some time, blinking at his toes and oblivious to what was going on around him.

When he at last arose, scorning Joe's offer of assistance, it was plain upon his face that he realized that he had been beaten.

"A-a-ah!" Shorty cried. "Yuh know yuh been licked, don't yuh? Yuh know he took yer measure. Are yuh goin' to keep yer promise? Or are yuh goin' back on yer word, jest like I thought yuh would?"

Hogan's jaw was set. "Shut that rat up if yuh have to kill him," he ordered. "Git the horses. There's been enough damn foolishness here to-night."

"Yeh, I knew yuh wouldn't keep yer word!" Shorty sneered.

Hogan jerked a gun from Joe's holster and walked over to the little prospector. His eyes, seen through narrow slits in his swollen brows, were blazing. He raised his gun. Shorty never moved.

"One more peep out o' you, yuh little rat, an' I'll sprinkle your brains from here to Caliente."

Shorty opened his mouth to reply and a fat hand closed over it tightly. A fat arm held him helpless. He subsided, perforce.

Hogan turned to his men. His face was far from prepossessing. It had been badly cut and the clotted blood was caked with dust. But he was again the dominating leader.

"Joe, you're to go with these men. You an' five others." He named them off. "I hold yuh responsible for 'em an' if anything goes wrong, you'll pay for it. I'm stayin' here to meet Kent in the mornin'. Now tie their hands behind 'em. Git handkerchiefs tied over their heads an' git 'em on the hosses."

"How about this one?" Joe motioned with his foot toward the unconscious Texan.

"He goes, too. Tie him into the saddle if yuh have to. But git movin'. Yuh got a long, tough ride ahead of yuh to-night."

CHAPTER XXII.

LOST.

BARRY awoke some time later. He knew instantly that some one at his side was holding him on a horse and that the horse was in motion. He opened his eyes and thought that he was blind, for he could not see a thing. Making to rub them, he discovered that his hands were tied behind him. Then, after a time, he realized that he was blindfolded.

The horse he rode was climbing slowly. From its movements Tex judged that he had been in the saddle for some time and that the trail had been steep. The horse seemed already to be tired. What had happened back there at the camp? Oh, yes. He'd been fighting with Hefty Hogan. He had had Hogan almost out when—well, what happened?

From the hoofbeats behind him and ahead of him he judged that he was in a company of some dozen horsemen. "Sho'ty!" he called, with some effort, for the handkerchief which bound his eyes hung over his lips.

"Right here, son," came a muffled voice from directly ahead of him. "How yuh feel, Tex?"

"Kind of rocky. Wheah are we?" The hand which had been steadying him in the saddle was withdrawn.

"Dunno, Tex." Shorty's voice sounded dead and hopeless. "We been on the trail for nearly an hour. I'm all turned around. I don't know whether we're headin' north or south. We been climbin' quite a bit, that's all I know. We're all blindfolded an' got our hands tied behind us."

"Yeh, I'm in the same boat. Who's with us?"

"All our gang, an' half a dozen o' Hogan's skunks."

"That'll be about enough from you birds," came a gruff voice from the rear. "Keep yer traps shut."

"Go to the devil!" Shorty returned politely. "Yuh see, Tex, after they knocked you out, they tied us all up an' blindfolded us an' started us out. I ain't figgered out yet what their game is or where they're takin' us. That was sure a dirty deal they gave yuh."

"How come, Sho'ty?"

"Hogan never knocked yuh out."

"No?"

"No. Yuh had him licked. That Joe feller cracked yuh over the head with the butt of his gun. You'd beaten the daylights out o' Hogan. Yuh had him licked to a fare-yuh-well. An' he jest the same as admitted it after I knocked him down." Shorty's voice had lost its lifelessness; he spoke with a certain pride.

"Sho'ty!" Tex exclaimed. "Yuh don't mean that yuh knocked that big bruiseh down!"

"Darned well right I knocked him down. Knocked him flat with one smack on the jaw."

"You bet he did, Tex," another voice, Hoggy Aire's, piped up. "Hogan was goin' to kick yuh after yuh was out. Shorty made a dive for him an' knocked him on his ear. You should o' seen it. It was sure a sight for sore eyes. Li'l' old Shorty. Picture it, Tex!"

"I'm tryin' to," Tex responded.

He felt a warm glow around his heart. Good old Shorty! There was a friend for you. Diving out from a circle of revolvers to protect his partner. Oh, it wasn't all pain that Tex felt as he rode along. The gratitude and love that warmed his heart made his aching head and tortured muscles easier to bear.

"That was some fight, Tex." Barry recognized the deep tones of Slim Cockrane coming from farther along the line. "We're mighty proud of yuh."

"You bet we are!" chimed in the voices of his other friends. They were all very loyal.

Well, it had been a good fight, Tex reflected, thinking of Hogan's gory countenance as he had last seen it. He'd paid back a few of the debts he owed the outlaw. Some time, with luck, he'd square the account in full.

They rode for hours. Up hill and down. On rocks that rang under their horses' hoofs and in deep sand that made only a faint, swishing sound. Occasionally their feet brushed the side of a cliff. Again they had the sensation of great height, as though riding along the scarp of some mesa. Always their

course was changing, turning, winding this way and that.

Conversation lagged, for there was nothing to discuss. They rode in the dead silence of hopelessness and utter helplessness.

They knew not where they were going, nor what would await them when they got there. And after hours of darkness with their hands tied behind them they did not care greatly.

For a long time Tex rode in a dull stupor. He had ceased to think, ceased trying to reason order out of the chaos of the night's events. So many things had happened in the last twelve hours that a mere contemplation of them dazed him.

There had been the clean-up and weighing of the gold; that alone should have been enough of an event for one day. There had been the astonishing discovery that Esther Lansdowne loved him; yes, the gods had smiled twice within a few hours. And then the gods had frowned; they had sent Hogan and his crew of outlaws to the mine and had turned happiness to heartbreak.

Too much to think about, particularly when a man's head roared with every step of the horse and felt as empty and light as a toy balloon. So Tex ceased trying to think. Dejected and utterly miserable, racked by pain and weariness, he rode on through the night.

At last he was vaguely conscious that it had grown lighter. Either day had dawned or the moon, now almost new, had risen. A short time later he heard shouts from the outlaws and the horses were brought to a halt. A man cut the thongs that bound his wrists and jerked the handkerchief off his face.

With weary, heartless eyes, Tex looked upon a new day. The cavalcade had halted on a mesa. Directly below them a deep gorge, with perpendicular walls, cut a long gash through the tableland.

At another time, Tex would have been struck with the beauty of the picture. There was deep red on the canyon walls, and a winding path of green followed a tiny silver stream down the gorge.

The level expanse of the mesa stretched off to an infinity of blue haze. The air was very still; the fresh, clean, early-morning smell of cedar and greasewood and sage.

Tex's senses, however, were alive to none of these things. He was still too stunned by the vicissitudes of the long night to care greatly where they were or what was going to happen to him. He looked at Shorty and Bull and Slim and the rest of the boys. They regarded him in silence.

"All right, boys," the man known as Joe ordered cheerfuly. "This is the end o' the line. Off yuh git."

They dismounted awkwardly and stood, a sorry little group of men, rubbing their aching muscles and trying to massage the circulation back into their numbed wrists and hands. Hoggy was the only one to speak.

"Hey, you," he accosted Joe, "how about some grub?"

"Never you mind about grub. If yuh have to have somethin' to worry about, you can start thinkin' about gittin' down that cliff."

Hoggy started and looked behind him. He was not more than ten feet away from the mesa's scarp and he made haste to increase that ten feet to twenty.

"Don't kid me, feller!" he said. "You don't think anybody could get down that cliff."

"Don't I?" Joe grinned. "Wait an' see."

One of the other men came up with a heavy coil of rope that had been cached some distance from the edge of the cliff. As he started to unwind it, Tex saw that it was a rope ladder. No one spoke until it had been securely fastened to a good-sized cedar and dropped off the rim.

"All right, boy," said Joe, still grinning. "Who's goin' down first?"

"Not me, baby," said Hoggy Aires, with a shrug of his ponderous shoulders. "Not first. And not last."

"Yuh dumb fools!" Shorty said heatedly. "That ladder don't reach halfway to the bottom 'o the canyon."

"Now jest keep yer shirt on, little half-pint!" Joe admonished. "You ain't goin' to the bottom o' the canyon."

"No? Where are we goin'?" Shorty demanded.

"Yuh'll see when yuh git there," the outlaw answered. "Here's the low-down. When yuh git into yer new home, you'll find some blankets an' a supply of grub. There's a spring there, too, fer fresh water, an' quite a bit o' wood. The grub, if yuh're careful of it, will last a month. At the end o' that time, if you been good boys, we'll see that yuh git some more grub."

"Huh! What makes yuh think we're goin' to stay put any place for a month?" Shorty asked.

"Because yuh won't be able to git away. And even if yuh did git away, yuh'd never find a trail out o' this country. You've come a long ways in the last six hours. Yuh don't know what direction yuh've come and if yuh tried to git out o' here without knowin' the trails yuh' git lost an' die in the desert. Now think that over."

"Huh!" Shorty grunted. "What makes yuh think we can't back-track over the trail we jest come?"

"Because we been too blamed careful. Most o' the way we never left no trail. We traveled on rock, where tracks don't show. Besides, yuh'll never git out from where yuh're goin' till we're ready to let yuh out. An' that'll be a mighty long time."

"How long?" Shorty asked, scoffingly.

"When them claims are worked out."

Shorty laughed, though without much humor. "Say, if yuh think yuh can git away with that kind o' stuff, yuh're crazy. Yuh may have the sheriff in with yuh. I been suspectin' that all the time, an' Hogan spilled the beans last night. But the sheriff ain't everybody, yuh know. There'll be an investigation o' this thing. Lansdowne'll see to that."

"Will he? Let him investigate. A lot o' good it'll do him. We haven't jumped into this thing half-cocked. Hogan knows what he's doin'. Everything is fixed. He's got a story cooked up that Lansdowne will swallow, hook, line, and sinker. The story holds water, see?"

"Yeh? Well, don't forgit that Lansdowne owns a third interest in them claims. The agreement o' pardnership is on file at the courthouse. I guess he'll have somethin' to say about what yuh do with 'em."

"Will he?" Joe laughed. "Wait an' see. Some time, if yuh ever git out o' this little ruckus, you'll take your hat off to Hefty Hogan an' admit that he's worked out the slickest little game in the world. Now git goin'. You, half-pint, over the side."

For a long moment Shorty glared at the other. Then he shrugged. He saw how hopeless it would be to put up a fight. He started down the ladder. A few minutes later the trembling ropes stilled and they knew he had reached the bottom of it, wherever that was.

Slim and Bull and Andy followed him down. Hoggy Aires might have put up a fight. He affirmed in no uncertain words that the ropes would never hold his weight. Barry, however, seeing the futility of argument or resistance, assured the big cook that the ropes were strong enough to support a good-sized steer and Hoggy, trembling violently, finally got up the courage to go over the side of the cliff.

"You next, Texas," Joe ordered.

Barry turned to him. "Joe, you can take my compliments to yo' boss," he said with quiet emphasis, "an' tell him

that some day I'm goin' to squah accounts, an' when I do I'll add a lot o' interest. I licked him once an' licked him fair. I can do it again, an' next time I'll do it right."

Tex turned quietly and started down the ladder. The cliff was undercut, he saw at once, sloping backward and downward to a wide ledge. On this ledge was the ruin of an ancient cliff dwelling, looking stark and empty before the little group of men who peered at it awesomely.

Tex dropped onto the ledge. He saw the rope ladder jerk upward and disappear from view. He looked out over the edge. Below, lay a hundred feet of sheer, straight sandstone to the floor of the canyon. Above vaulted some fifty feet of undercut wall that would have taxed the climbing ability of a fly.

Escape, without help, would be utterly impossible. And there was no one who knew they had been imprisoned, or even where their prison was. Hefty Hogan had planned well.

A plaintive moan came from Hoggy Aires, who had squatted dejectedly, still trembling after his climb, on a tumbled-down wall of the cliff dwelling.

"They said there was grub," he groaned. "An' gee! I ain't even got heart enough left to look fer it!"

—**The next installment of this novel will appear in the following issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, dated and on the news stands May 1st.**

BIRD OR BEAST?

MAN, be he white, red, yellow, or black, usually conforms to general similarity in shape. He walks upright on two legs. He speaks some kind of understandable language and uses his hands in some manner of making a living.

With animals, reptiles, fowls, and fish, there is not this general similarity.

Taking up the case of fowls one finds the ostrich greatly different from the canary. Neither are they alike as to their shape, use of wings, or the utterance of their bird calls. Some birds change their habitat with the seasons—others stick it out the year round in the same place.

The same is the case with reptiles. The snake differs from the crocodile. With fish there is also a great divergence. The killer shark does not resemble the sardine, any more than in animal life does the man-eating tiger look or act like the Mexican Chihuahua dog.

But the strangest of all are where the creatures belonging to the four kingdoms, other than man, seem to overlap. Under this category belongs the whale. He lives in the water, but is considered a mammal.

More unusual than the status of the whale is that of the duckbill platypus. This little creature has stumped scientists to a great extent. He is said to be able to climb trees, dive and swim in the water. His head ends in a bill like that of a duck. His body and legs are covered with fur, like a mole or otter. Then, this peculiar beast hatches its young from eggs more on the order of a bird or reptile, but suckles them more after the manner of a dog, horse, or other animal.

The Big Test

by Reg Dinsmore

A Lumber Camp Story



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

THE "FEEDER."

FROM the long slope of the ridge that dipped its spruce-clad sweep to the banks of the frozen river, team bells chimed musically. Nearer and nearer came the team. At last, with the squeak of harness and jangle of binding chains it emerged from the thick growth and trotted proudly down across the slight decline of the clearing. With skillful hands the youthful driver swung his team alongside the huge landing of logs piled high on the bank of the ice-fettered stream.

"Whoa, boys! Be quiet now," soothed Charley Rugg, patting the steaming grays as he covered them with heavy blankets. "Lion, you're feelin' too good for anything." He rubbed the great horse's nose affectionately. "Steady now while I drop this load of logs!"

If one had been watching Charley Rugg closely as he walked back to his load and began loosening the grabhooks of the long chains that incircled the logs, they would have noticed a slight limp in his gait, a faltering of one of his hands that was busy with the hooks.

Two years before, Rugg had been driving team for Jim Quimby, over on the Squaw Mountain cut. A snub rope, used to lower the heavy loads down a sharp "ram-down," had parted. Rugg, four horses, and a big bunkload of long spruce went over a forty-foot bank at the side of the road and piled in a kicking, screaming tangle in the rocky ravine below. They pulled Charley Rugg, unconscious, from beneath a dead horse, shot two of the other horses that were injured beyond cure, and sent the boy to the hospital down-river.

Charley Rugg was small for his age, and somewhat frail at that. He drew a man's pay check, though some of the other teamsters of the camp, jealous, intimated that if a *man* had been driving the team, or if the young fellow had not gone "yellow" at a critical moment, the team could have been held to the road and the accident averted.

Jim Quimby had been a mountain logger too long to believe that, however. He had seen teams "sluiced" before. He knew that no teamster, re-

gardless of his strength or skill, could have swung those fear-driven horses and hurtling logs around the sharp turn there at the foot of the ram-down and held them to the road.

So, four months later, when Rugg came back to the camp, a mere shadow of his former self, and with one hand and one foot that threatened to drag and falter through the rest of his life, Jim Quimby had given him a job.

At first, the young man worked as "feeder" in the horse hovel. The pay was only about half of what he had been getting as a teamster. He was well content with his job, however, for it gave him a chance to be with the great, gentle horses that he loved so well.

He worked among them, always with a little, tuneless, light-hearted whistle on his lips, brushing, currying, rubbing a stiffened tendon with soothing liniment here, salving a collar-galled shoulder there. He came to know the individuality of each horse even better than the men who drove them.

It gave Jim Quimby, hard-boiled old camp boss though he was, a strange tightening of the throat to see the grays, and bays, and blacks, and roans nudging at the boy's crippled shoulder with their velvet muzzles, teasing for the sugar that Charley was forever wheedling from the camp cook for his dearly beloved dumb charges. Quimby knew he could have picked no better man for a feeder.

Then came the time when Lion and Blue, the big grays that were driven by the rat-faced, fractious, trouble-loving "Link" Maynard, revolted. In his zeal to put more spruce onto the landings than his fellow drivers, Maynard persisted in overloading the team.

When the heavy load slewed from the road, cut down into the untrodden snow and stuck there with the solidity of a granite boulder, Maynard leaped out onto the tongue of his sled between the horses and lashed them cruelly with his rein butts.

A half dozen times the big grays nearly burst their honest hearts in efforts to start the immovable load, then had given up. When Jim Quimby happened around a turn of the road, Maynard was mauling them mercilessly with a two-handed club that he had cut beside the road with his sled ax.

Maynard was a big man, but size meant nothing to Jim Quimby. He tore the club from the anger-crazed teamster's hands and hurled it far into the woods. Then he gave Link Maynard his choice of "hitting the tote road"—which in logging vernacular means leaving the crew—or going to work with the swamping crew in their work of cutting out and "skidding up" roads.

Grouchily Maynard chose the swamping crew. Quimby unhitched the grays from the sled and drove them sweating, trembling, and wild-eyed to the hovel. Charley Rugg nearly cried over their distress as he bathed the cruel welts on their sides with hot salt water.

Jim Quimby was troubled. A logging crew is a smooth-running machine when working at its best, but pull a man out of it, and it becomes unbalanced. It was getting along in the season. To fulfill his contract, Quimby knew that he must keep each part of the machine moving with uninterrupted smoothness.

What he was to do for another teamster he did not know, but he did know that he could not afford to have the big grays stand still, even for a day.

Rugg sensed something of Quimby's thoughts. Suddenly he straightened up from where he had been combing the snow from the heavy fetlocks of Lion and faced his boss.

"Jim, why can't I drive Lion and Blue? They'll do anything for me," he pleaded.

"Think ye feel strong enough to tackle it?"

"Sure I do!" said Charlie Rugg, straightening his small body to the greatest height his injuries would allow. "Try me."

Jim Quimby had the heart of an ox. The pleading, the hope in the boy's eyes was too much for him. As he turned toward the hovel door he spoke gruffly, trying to camouflage with his voice the pity that he was fearful had showed in his face:

"All right, Charley. Take 'em out in the morning."

CHAPTER II.

THE RUNAWAYS.

As Charley Rugg worked at the frosty chains of his load, "Big Pete" Lessard, the huge French-Canadian "landing-roller," came trotting up. Despite the fact that Big Pete tipped the scales at two hundred and forty pounds, his step was as light and mincing as that of a highly trained athlete. A white-toothed grin split his cheerful face. The sheer happiness of being alive this crisp winter morning seemed to emanate from every pore of his superb body.

"*Bon jour,* my leetle fren'!" he hailed. "It is lak dis dat Peter Lessard feel dis fine mornin'. So!"

The long canthook, or "peavey," as lumbermen call the implement, spun through the air. Whirling like a great pinwheel, it flashed a distance of forty feet, and its steel-tipped end sank with a metallic clank into the exact center of the end of a log. Its rock-maple handle vibrated with the force of the impact.

"Got him all train, eh? Do dat every time!" smiled the big Canadian.

And this was no idle boast. Years of constant use gave this rugged son of the Northland a dexterity with the awkward tool that was nothing less than marvelous. In his hands it was as sure and unerring as the blade of the Mexican knife thrower, or the six-gun of the old-time plainsman.

Nor were the fanciful stunts which the big Frenchman put his steel-shod lever through the only skill he could display with it. Lumberjacks spoke respectfully when they told of the almost superhuman things that Big Pete could do with his peavey to the twisted and tangled log jams of the spring drives. Spruce logs were as jack-straws to the huge Canuck.

Big Pete married the dark-eyed, raven-tressed daughter of old Noel Wing, famous Indian guide of the Allegash country, and brought her here to the camp of the Cleartimber Company. They lived with their little three-year-old son, Napoleon, in a small cabin across the clearing from the main lumber camp.

Before his marriage the big Frenchman's reputation as a fighter had reached from Bangor to Fort Kent. He was never known to look for trouble, but neither was he ever known to side-step it. He fought as he lived—with a laugh on his lips. To all appearances, fear was something that he did not know the meaning of.

Yet, deep within his heart, Big Pete was grudgingly forced to admit that there was something of which he was deadly afraid. Something that could drive all the blood of his body to his heart, leaving his great frame as weak and nerveless as though stricken with paralysis—and this thing an animal no larger than a good-sized dog.

Years ago, when he was a youngster no larger than his own little "Nap," his mother had left him asleep on the doorstep of the little farmhouse up in the Riviere Du Loup country, while she went to the spring for a bucket of water. A shadow had blotted the warm spring sunshine from his face, causing him to awake.

Wide-eyed with horror, he had looked straight up into a pair of blazing, yellow eyes. Above the eyes a pair of tasseled ears twitched nervously. Sinister lips curled away from wicked fangs, and from the pink throat issued a snarl so terrifying that it loosened the terror in the child's small body. He had screamed.

The lynx sprang away, and when Peter's frightened mother hurried around the corner of the house she saw nothing whatever except little Peter, who lay white and still in a deathlike faint of fright.

Peter never fully recovered from that scare. Even now, when he crossed the round track of a hunting *loup-cervier,* the back of his massive neck would prickle apprehensively, and his feet would quicken in their stride. He laughed at himself because of the weakness, yet he was ashamed of it.

In spite of the fact that Big Pete knew that the lynx is a natural coward and will not fight unless cornered, he was afraid. For all of the knowledge that it was probably curiosity regarding the little child's red dress that Peter was wearing that had caused the big cat to come so close, he could not rid himself of a feeling of faintness when he knew that there was a possibility that one of the creatures was lurking in the near-by shadows.

With the help of Big Pete, Charley Rugg was not long in unloading the load of logs on his sled bunks.

While the Frenchman was busily engaged in rolling off the last few sticks, the boy went to the uneasy horses, pulled off their blankets and folded them to act as a seat on his sled bunk for the mile-long ride back to the cutting. To give himself the use of both hands, he dropped the reins to the ground.

Big Pete rolled the last log from the sled. Its heavy end fell on a skid—a section of maple sapling four inches in diameter and possibly five feet long. The skid was balanced in such a way that the blow flipped it with stinging force against the flank of the nervous Lion.

Impatient with waiting for the load to be dumped, made uneasy and uncomfortable by the biting cold, it was all that was needed to throw the high-strung horse into a panic. With a wild snort, a plunge, and a jangle of bells, Lion and his mate were off.

Charley cried a warning "whoa!" and threw himself upon the reins. He reached them with his good hand, was instantly yanked flat and found himself being dragged through a flying smother of snow.

With clenched teeth Charley Rugg clung to those narrow ribbons of leather. It seemed to him that his arm was being torn from its very socket, but still he clung.

The horses, with the usual perversity of panic-stricken animals, did the very thing that was not expected—swung from the road, plunged through the deep snow of the river bank and gained the open going of the river ice. Here, where the snow was not so deep, they turned down the stream and ran as only a frightened team can. Their young driver trailed like a sack of straw at the end of the reins.

In the brain of Charley Rugg a vivid picture flashed. A picture of a sharp bend of the stream three hundred yards below. A picture of water-soaked patches of snow, where sharp cross currents had gnawed beneath the ice until it was unsafe for even a dog to cross. The team was rushing headlong straight at this dangerous footing.

Through the flying snow from the horses' hoofs which choked and buffeted him, the boy called to the running team. Pleaded and commanded, sobbed and pleaded again. He would

have to stop them before they reached that treacherous turn, or——

"Whoa, Lion! Whoa, Blue! Steady—don't you hear me?"

Old Blue, the "near" horse, not so young and full of ginger as his impetuous mate, was tiring of the run. Gradually he slowed his pace in response to the boy's commands. Through the brain of Charley Rugg flashed the thought that the battle was nearly won. And then:

With a dull crash the sled, beside which he was dragging, bumped into a solidly frozen hummock of ice on the side opposite him. It rebounded from the obstruction with the force of a battering-ram. Its bunk end struck Charley Rugg just above the temple.

When the wiggly streaks and flashes of fire had melted out of the boy's brain, and he sat up to look dazedly around, it was just in time to see his beloved grays gallop headlong onto a wet patch of snow, to go crashing through into the swift, black current which closed over them almost instantly.

CHAPTER III.

YELLOW.

WHEN Charley Rugg told Jim Quimby of the accident the camp boss was very considerate. He looked the boy long and steadily in the eye, read the keen sorrow in his face. Instead of discharging him on the spot, as Charley expected he would, Quimby said:

"That's five of 'em—horses, I mean. Three when you got sluiced on the mountain, an' now Lion and Blue through the ice. I know you're as good a driver as I've got, Charley; but ye're just plain unlucky. An' it costs money! Supposin' you keep away from the horses a while. Go up to the cook camp and help the cook."

So, with his heart nearly bursting with the grief he tried to hide, yet with no feeling of resentment toward kind-hearted Jim Quimby, Charley began his duties as "cookee."

During the weeks that followed, Charley Rugg sensed a change in the attitude of the men toward him. Fellows who had always been ready to swap pleasantries would freeze into glum silence when he was about. Even Big Pete Lessard, who had been his warmest friend, shunned him whenever possible.

As for Link Maynard, the former driver of the dead grays, he sneered and leered openly. To be thus ignored and sneered at got under the boy's skin, and he went about his duties with a lack-luster eye and an air of despondency. This was not at all like the laughing, joking Charley Rugg of old.

"Buck up, lad!" cheered Jim Quimby, coming upon the boy in the storehouse one morning. "Don't let them birds up there at camp git on yer nerves."

"It's enough to get any one's nerves!" blurted Charley. "The way they stop talking when I come around, keep out of my way, and watch me out of the corner of their eyes, you'd think I'd committed a murder or somethin'! What's got into 'em, Jim? What makes 'em treat me as they do?"

"Well," mused the boss, looking away across the spruce-carpeted valley, "If yer *must* know I s'pose I'll tell you. Yer know, lad, that most any true lumberjack had rather lose an arm than see a team killed.

"Big Pete saw that runaway, yer know, but you'd got too far away for him to see the sled jump and hit you. Pete thought you dropped the reins a-purpose. Said if you'd stayed with 'em for another five rods, you'd stopped 'em. I'm afraid—I'm afraid he kinduv spread the news that ye're yellow, lad."

Rugg turned quickly and busied himself at a sack of beans. It was bad enough to lose the team—but to have

the fellows think that he'd gone yellow and dropped those reins—gosh, he'd like to bawl if he wasn't eighteen!

"But mind you, Charley," continued the boss, "I know they're wrong—dead wrong! If I hadn't known it, I'd a-fired yer on the spot. I know what a little tap on the coco will do to a feller; and I believe if yer hadn't got that clip you'd saved the team. And now, Charley, go right on tendin' to yer work an' fergit all about it."

Charley Rugg couldn't forget. When one is among a crew of sixty men, each one of whom considers the crime of yellowness to be the lowest in the code, and when one is assured that each man of the sixty looks upon him as a yellowback, forgetting is out of the question.

The winter was well advanced; the days were growing noticeably longer, and the midday sun shone down into the clearing where the long, low lumber camps of the Cleartimber Company squatted with a warmth that promised of spring.

In the edge of the shadowy spruces, on the side of the clearing nearest the storehouse, Ragged Ear, the great Canadian lynx, crouched in a tangle of underbrush. His wide, yellow eyes searched the opening and the thicket about him uneasily as the strange smell of man came to his nostrils.

Hunting had been particularly hard for the big cat. Rabbits were exceedingly scarce, and the grouse had left the swamps for the hardwood ridges, where plenty of yellow-birch buds and an occasional beechnut were obtainable. Ragged Ear was ravenously hungry.

On the light breeze that blew across the clearing the ravishing odor of fresh meat was borne. Even to Ragged Ear's nose, which is very dull indeed, the smell was strong and enticing. His rough tongue curled about his bewhiskered chops in anticipation of the feast so near at hand. Silent as a long, gray shadow his mottled body glided forward a few more yards.

The appetizing odor seemed to come from the dark hole in that strange pile of logs, and Ragged Ear, locating to his satisfaction its source, bounded with half a dozen high-hipped jumps across the open space and disappeared through the half-open door of the storehouse.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUNGRY LYNX.

"HEY, cookee!" yelled the overworked cook. "Slip over to the storehouse an' fetch me one o' them hams! Make it fast, kid; it's most noon now!"

Without stopping to put on any outdoor clothing, Charley Rugg ducked under the low lintel of the cook-camp door and started on a limping run across the clearing to the storehouse. As he ran he caught sight of a small red toque bobbing along above the embankment of shoveled snow beside the path that led from Big Pete Lessard's cabin, down past the storehouse, to the main camp in the clearing.

"Little Nap—going to meet his father," thought Charley.

The child had reached the storehouse. Noticing that the door stood ajar, his childish curiosity led him to explore.

Inside, little Nap paused in wide-eyed wonder to gaze around him at the high tiers of boxes and bags, the hanging quarters of beef that depended from great hooks in the shadowy rafters, the piled barrels of pork and flour; then something else caught his eye, and he started forward at a little trot.

"Pitty kitty!" cooed the child. "Come, pitty kitty!"

The great lynx, interrupted in his long-deferred feast, arched his steel-muscled back, snarled horribly, and

sidled into a corner. Never would he let this puny man thing take from him this long-sought-for feast of red meat! One stroke of his taloned paw would tear that little white throat as it would the soft breast of a grouse.

Little Nap, seemingly not at all alarmed by the savage behavior of the supposed "kitty," toddled forward another yard.

Ragged Ear crouched low. His great hind paws shifted uneasily, gripping the rough-pole floor, setting themselves to hurl his sinister body in a spring that could mean but one thing for the child.

Charley Rugg reached the storehouse, stepped inside and closed the door. It took an instant for his eyes to accustom themselves to the dimly lighted interior. The lisping prattle of the child reached his ears. It struck him as peculiar that little Nap should be talking to a cat when there was no such animal around the camps. Then the temporary snow-blindness passed. Like figures on a photographic film suddenly becoming visible under the action of the developer, the situation was revealed to him in all its tenseness.

Charley Rugg could never remember what his thoughts were at the time. Perhaps he was one of those fortunate individuals whose muscles require no conscious line of thought to put them into action when a crisis it as hand. What he did remember was hurling himself across the intervening space to brush the child aside and meet in mid-air a furry body that wrapped itself about his head and shoulders.

Long fangs met again and again in the forearm of his arm. Curved claws that seemed red hot ripped and furrowed his face and neck. He staggered and fell to the floor with the cat beneath him.

Some one called to little Nap to run—to go to the door and open it. Charley knew that it was his own voice, yet a voice he had never heard before. But now the creature's throat—he must reach it!

"A-rgh!" there it was—at last.

The boy's sinewy fingers dug deep into the corded neck of the thrashing cat, found the windpipe, closed like steel clamps, and, despite the punishing talons whose every slash made a new wound, held inexorably.

He must hold! He *must* hold! Would those cruel claws never cease their cutting? Would the savage snarl never die from that fanged mouth so close to his own face? Hold it! Hold——

A cloud swam before the boy's eyes. His senses fought past its sickening folds. His will power forced every atom of his remaining strength to those fingers about the cat's throat.

Ragged Ear's efforts became weaker—ceased. A convulsive shudder, and the mottled form went limp. Back came that dizzying cloud again. Charley Rugg, with his fingers still clenched in Ragged Ear's furry throat, fell forward across the lynx's body.

Five minutes later, on his way to dinner, Big Pete Lessard passed the storehouse. His attention was arrested by the peculiar action of the heavy wooden latch on the door. Some one within, it seemed, was trying to lift it. This some one lacked the necessary strength. The big Frenchman's white teeth gleamed in a smile.

"Ah-ha!" he called cheerily, "some big mans go on de storehouse, bang de door, an' make for himself a trap—eh? Why for yo' not come meet yo' daddy Pete, 'stead of monkey on de storehouse—eh?"

He pulled open the heavy door. The child, white and round-eyed, held up his hands to his father. The child's hands were red.

"I tan't wake up Charley," the little fellow quavered. "Bad cat try for

bite little Nap. Charley whip bad cat. Come an' see."

Big Pete kicked open the door of the "man's camp" with a bang. In his arms was the unconscious form of Charley Rugg. Men stood agape as he crossed the room and tenderly laid the boy in a bunk.

"Water, bandage, co't plaster!" he snapped at the curious lumberjacks who pressed forward.

Then, as the huge Canadian laved Rugg's lacerated arms and shoulders, and bandaged them with a touch as light as that of any woman, his deep voice filled the camp with a subdued, savage rumble.

"Yo' fellaires! Yo' remembaire I have say dis boy she—how yo' call it—yellow? I was mistake! Very dam mooch mistake! Ten minute pass he save mah little Nap—mah *petit infant,* from de great *loup-cervier.* Wit' hees bare han' he choke dat cat hon de neck hontil he die!

"Las' week, when I pass hon de river trail, I meet dis same *loup-cervier.* In mah han' I have mah peavey. Wit' it I could have bash dat cat's head or pin him to side of de tree. But did I? Non! Somethin' on mah heart get all cold an' fooney, an' I, Big Pete Lessard, turn 'round an' run like one scairt rabbit."

Big Pete tenderly adjusted the last bandage and turned savagely upon the crew. He stepped into the middle of the floor and threw off his mackinaw.

"Com' hon, yo' sled tender, swamper, teamster, chopper—hannybody dat still t'ink dat boy she yaller. Step hout here like little man an' let Big Pete Lessard wamp yo' hon de jaw!"

THE GYPSY HEART

By Pat Costello

THE gypsy heart can never rest
   Like hearts in others can.
It's eager for the far-flung crest;
   The dusty caravan.

It's eager to be gone to pitch
   A camp and make a bed
Beside the trail to Venture which
   Lies just a mile ahead.

It's eager to peruse the themes
   That nature wrote and bound
Within her forests and her streams,
   To mortal minds astound.

It's few who have the gypsy heart;
   A heart which goads them on
To pack a handkerchief and start
   Toward the setting sun.

No Surrender

By Charles F. Goodnow Jr.

A Story of the Great War



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

SHOTS FROM SHELL HOLES.

PRIVATE DITTY lifted his head carefully above the shell hole in which he and Private Blimp were flattened, and gazed at the churned waste in his front. Two hundred yards ahead and to his right loomed a large clump of shell-battered trees. From these woods scarcely visible puffs of smoke shot upward, and the dull coughing of trench mortars filled the air with a rushing sound. The advance had been held up by these mortars and by a badly smashed concrete pill box on the left.

Ditty scanned the woods carefully, but he could see no moving figures, nor could he see the mortars. Then glancing toward the pill box he beheld, through a smashed aperture, the spitting muzzle of a Maxim.

Pulling his shaut-shaut—automatic rifle—toward the pill box and taking careful aim he emptied the remainder of his clip. While his dancing weapon prevented him from seeing the effect of his shots he knew instinctively that they had not gone far from home. Blimp pulled a filled clip from his *musette* bag and handed it to him with a word of encouragement.

"They're landin' square."

Ditty spat. "These dizzy shaut-shauts do a Saint Vitus every time you use 'em."

The Maxim in their front began to clatter again, and Blimp grabbed his companion by the shoulder and pulled him into the hole. Above them the mud slithered and jumped with life, and the two men knew that their range and number had been noted.

"The dirty bums!" said Ditty, working himself lower. "Every time yuh try to start something them babies spoil it."

"Yeah, that's the trouble with war." Blimp rose slowly. "Listen—they're slammin' again somewhere else. Try it some more, an' I'll watch an' see do they swing this way."

The bullets had ceased to rake the top of the shell hole, and Ditty swung his shaut-shaut into action again. He trained the muzzle of the kicking weapon toward the hole in the pill box and was rewarded with a subdued cry from Blimp.

"Boy, you got there! Looka that!"

The spatter of bullets had dislodged a loose chunk of the pill box, and the piece had fallen into the opening, blocking the aperture.

An officer jumped to his feet. "All right! Forward!"

"Kiss me good-by," said Blimp, handing a new clip to Ditty while the latter rose. "We're goin' to do some steppin'."

An irregular line of khaki-clothed men rushed forward, and the pair advanced with them, Ditty emptying his shaut-shaut from the hip. In a few moments the smashed pill box was reached. A dozen men with bayonet-tipped rifles leaped into the place; there were odd sounds, a muffled curse, pistol and rifle shots. Then the sounds of combat subsided.

To the left of the line toward the wood there was a messing noise of Luger reports, cries and the din of close work. The thick smoke of grenades followed a half-dozen detonations, and presently a casualty was seen directing a small detachment of prisoners to the rear.

Up forward the noise had not abated. There was the combined chatter of five or six Maxim guns. The eyes of Blimp and Ditty took on a look that was not in accord with their peaceful natures.

Blimp voiced his companion's thoughts. "Boy, they're mowin'!" He looked to the left and then turned away quickly.

Again the advance was halted, while communications were established with the artillery. A lieutenant with a lacerated mouth grinned at the two men. "They'll blast them out of there in short order," he said.

"I know, sir," said Blimp. "But just now the blastin seems to be comin' our way."

"More stepped-up enthusiasm," vouchsafed Ditty as the officer passed along to their right.

"My mouth tastes like the Sahara," said Blimp.

"Cheer up!" said Ditty soothingly. "We're goin' to be leap-frogged sometime before night, an' then it'll be bokoo sleep an' bokoo rest. I ain't slep' for so long I've forgotten how."

"Don't worry," spat Blimp; "your mem'ry'll come back soon enough."

There was a roar some mile and a quarter in the rear, and presently the air was filled with a whining sound. It seemed that all the artillery in the entire sector had concentrated their pieces on the immediate front. Blimp and Ditty watched with mingled feelings of relief as the barrage met the ground, and the two men noted that the marksmanship was excellent.

The command went along the line: "Forward!"

"The first ten years is the hardest," said Ditty as he stumbled over something that had once been a member of a prize enemy regiment.

"Yeah," observed Blimp, "them recruiting posters ain't what they're cracked up to be."

In the heyday of their enlistments Blimp and Ditty had welcomed war with arms that had been more or less open. But a quick welcome into an everlasting past, which is an ever-present contingency in a line company, had soured their dispositions.

Within the last three days their intimates, Truden, Barry, Dix, Malone and Dulay, had taken the trip, and thirty-two members of their company had been wounded. Yet Blimp and Ditty, as products of America, still upheld their national characteristics.

Drama and things dramatic, and the hereditary hates of Europe were not for them.

Private Blimp eyed his companion. "Ditty, it's too bad you ain't a corporal now. You wouldn't have to be luggin' that shaut-shaut around an' takin' orders from me."

"Huh, I never wanted to be a corporal. 'Twas a great day when we found that case of champagne, an' if I was busted for it it ain't nobody's fault but mine, an' maybe yours."

Ditty had been reduced in rank by a case of champagne, a slight A. W. O. L., and a consequent reprimand which a heavy head had failed to appreciate at the time.

The two crusaders found another shell hole of ample proportions and availed themselves of its protection. It was well that the hole was of large dimensions, for the barrage had not as yet silenced the enemy's guns, and the bullets were cutting about them.

Collectively, Blimp and Ditty took up a lot of space. The erstwhile corporal—Ditty—was of tall proportions, better than six feet by several height-adding inches. And while his general physique did not correspond with his height—he was painfully, though naturally slim—the bulky body of Private Blimp made up for what Ditty's form lacked.

Blimp was heavy; he was chunky and plump; he was all that Ditty was not. And yet, his stoutness was accentuated by an almost abnormal shortness for one of his weight. Their combined cubic content nearly filled the shell hole.

"Yes," went on Blimp, urging his body deeper, "war sure is nice. *Wham!* Listen to that barrage!"

The artillery was working frantically now, the booming of the heavies almost drowning the staccato barks of the .75s. Yet they listened with admiration to the smaller guns.

"Listen to them babies loadin' on the recoil!" commented Ditty. "That dizzy artillery outfit of ours sure knows how to make them .75s talk."

"All right, let's go!" an officer barked. "An' straighten out that line!"

The barrage had lifted. All that could be seen of the place where the shells had been striking was a long cloud of smoke and shell fumes that hung heavily on the ground. To all appearances the enemy's line of resistance had been blotted out. Yet directly ahead a machine gun commenced to scream like a thing in torment, and the advancing line was compelled to throw itself prone.

The confusion increased. Since hopping off many hours before, the line had shifted. Organizations became mixed, as is the invariable way with all attacking forces. A company of French engineers, converted into infantry, had filtered in from the left and were going forward with the advancing line of Americans.

CHAPTER II.

STORMING A NEST.

BLIMP and Ditty were approached by a Frenchman, with a good smattering of picturesque English and a preposterous mustache. He crawled up behind them and grinned.

"Good afternoon, comrades," he said. "This day we have do good work, eh? And we do some better work before night."

"Won't be anybody left by night," said Ditty.

"Ah, you Americans are much mad; you go too fast. The cost is too great. In this afternoon I was see five Americans charge the *mitrailleuse*—the machine gun—from the front. But one man he reach the gun—only one—an' he was leap through the air for last eight, ten feet. Ah, it was sight, my comrades—beautiful, terrible.

"The machine gun he was point straight for this man, and he has the dozen bullet in him before he reach the muzzle. But yes, he was dead, dead, before he get to them. Yet his gun was point' right for lunge, and when his body strike, his bayonet spitted the gunner like a capon."

Blimp and Ditty were appreciative. The complimentary remarks warmed their palpitating hearts, for they had seen the ranks melt as the advance progressed.

"Yeah, tough stuff," said Blimp. "How come you talk so good United States, munseer?"

The Frenchman, who was of medium height and build, pointed to the left. "You see the man there?—the one with much mud on the clothes? He is my brother. For five years we own small restaurant in the New York. Yes. We do good business. Then in the begin' of war we hear that our town where we was born come under the enemy heel. Louis and I we sell the business and come back."

The Frenchman raised his tunic and exposed his belt. "You see much notch, yes? Seventeen of them. My brother he have twenty-two. It is game, you see. One time I have the most—then Louis he have the most. We take many of the dogs. Me—it was six in the Champagne, ten at Verdun——"

"Everybody up. Let's go!"

The Frenchman was lost in the confusion of the advance. Ditty looked down the long wave of advancing men and spoke to Blimp. "Them babies take many enemies, huh? Seventeen ain't so bad at that."

A man at his side crumpled up like a jackknife. Fifty yards to the right a shell burst directly above the column and scarcely fifteen feet from the ground, and the shrapnel plowed a wide gap in the staggering line.

The two men looked at the havoc and pressed on, as a shell crashed into the ground some twenty steps ahead.

Blimp spat some mud from his mouth that had been thrown there by a shell chunk. "Ditty," said he, "do you think they've got that machine gun out ahead? If them devils is waitin' for a close-up with that thing we won't never see Hoboken."

As if in answer to his thought the hidden gun commenced to boil again, scarcely a hundred yards ahead.

"Down!"

The unnecessary command found the men already hugging the ground, while the gun swept the air above them. Seemingly the weapon was well concealed, for all efforts to locate it had been futile. How it had escaped the barrage was one of the inexplicable wonders of chance.

"Them gunners is picked guardsmen," said Ditty, as the weapon continued to clatter.

Presently the range was lowered and little spurts of dirt commenced to fly up along the line.

"Yeah, them guys is good shots," agreed Blimp; "an' they never expect to see their homeland again either. They're goin' to sell out at a high figure. Where's that wild French baby with the seventeen notches?"

"He's pan-cakin' over here now," observed Ditty.

The Frenchman was crawling toward them, and behind him came the man whom he had indicated as his brother. The elder Frenchman paused and gesticulated and the other nodded assent.

"They got something on their dizzy minds," said Blimp. "If them birds ain't knocked off before night there's goin' to be some more notches in their belts. An' ain't the guy with twenty two notches a young lookin' ham?"

The ground was still being whipped in spots by vagrant machine-gun bullets, and the quick whine of the hot missiles kept the line hugging the grass.

Yet the Frenchman of the mustache reached Ditty's side and introduced his quiet appearing brother.

"This is Louis," he said; "and we have think of plan to get those fiends with the gun. But we ask some help from you men with the shaut-shaut. It will be very simple."

"Yeah, much obliged to you," said Ditty, embracing the ground tightly; "but it ain't so simple as it looks. We'd be polished off like a chicken at a African supper. If you guys is figurin' on gettin' some more notches in your belts you better lay low until they blast them out of there with a few G. I. cans or something.

"Yeah, that's right," said Blimp. "I ain't cravin' to alligator up on any machine gun that's talkin' fast as this one is. An' a minute ago you was argufyin' about goin' ahead too fast, munseer. How come?"

The younger Frenchman spoke. "You see, my friends, there is just the one gun there. There are no other, or they would fire. To the left of the gun there is much brush and grass that is high. As soon we do get behind that, we have them. And we do it much easy by going ahead slowly. In the high grass we don't see them; they don't see us. François, he have the idea. It is very good."

A lieutenant approached on his hands and knees. The elder Frenchman saluted and outlined his plan.

The officer mopped a perspiring brow and considered the matter. "If you could take a half-dozen men with you it might be feasible. You men with the shaut-shaut—and you, Blane, Goss, Hammond and Gandy. Listen to the Frenchman's plan! Go forward with him and attempt to outflank that gun ahead. Go carefully. We'll engage the gun's attention here in front if possible."

"Huh, we're gettin' some of their attention now," observed Blimp. "Anyway, I notice we ain't sufferin' from no neglect."

The eight men crawled slowly some two hundred feet to the left, and then edged forward in a wide circle. Meanwhile a clatter of rifle fire from the center of the line indicated that an attempt was being made to engage the attention of the hidden weapon.

Ahead, the two Frenchmen led the crawling cavalcade, which pushed forward cautiously for some five minutes. Presently the machine gun roared with renewed fury not thirty yards to the right, and the eight men pancaked themselves, waiting for the hot slash of lead. But seemingly their approach had not been detected.

The elder Frenchman beckoned to Ditty. The latter slid forward, with Blimp at his side, and the two crusaders beheld the intense face of the gunner behind the screeching weapon.

The Frenchman put his lips to Ditty's ear. "My comrade," he whispered, "Louis and I we get them alone; but to make for sure we all three begin to fire at one time. When I say *now,* we all pull trigger at same time."

Ditty pushed his shaut-shaut slowly ahead, and the Frenchmen slung their rifles forward from a prone position. At that ill-timed moment Goss caught sight of the enemy gunners and fired, his bullet ricocheting a foot to the right of the half-concealed nest.

Blimp and Ditty saw the gunner traverse his weapon in a flash, and the next moment the ground about them was being ripped by a shower of singing lead.

The Frenchman shouted, "Now!" but Ditty was already cuddling his trigger, his bullets ripping a path just under the enemy gun. Still gripping the trigger he raised his head, saw his stream of bullets tearing short. Then he lowered the butt of his shaut-shaut. The gunner's face took on a look of unbelievable surprise. He pitched for-

ward on his weapon and twitched violently.

The Frenchman jumped to his feet. "*A moi!* charge!"

The detachment swung forward in a half-blind rush. There was the crack of two Lugers; and the air was now rent with cries of *"Kamerad!"* Two blue-clad men and four khaki-clad men reached the implacement in a mad scramble of bolt-working and trigger-squeezing.

Two men in blue cloth and three men in khaki cloth arose from the implacement. The elder Frenchman turned toward the rear and motioned the line forward. Blimp looked about him and became dizzily sick.

Ditty shouted. "Gosh, we done it! Hey, Gandy, carry Blimp's *musette* bag till he gets his sea-legs—Goss is marked off; so's Blane an' Hammond. Wonder when we're goin' to be leap-frogged?"

François, the elder brother spoke. "This has been done well, my comrades. The cost it is high—but not so much if we had take the gun from the front. Louis, this man he is yours; one more notch in the belt."

"You fire first, François. The notch it is yours."

"Divide him up," suggested Blimp, whose color had returned.

A lieutenant reached them. "Good work, men. Decorations here. Watch yourself! Down!"

CHAPTER III.

STRATEGY NECESSARY.

SOME two hundred yards ahead, in the edge of a peaceful-looking wood, another Maxim was screaming lead in their direction. The range was imperfect; yet presently another gun opened up, and the fire commenced to be effective.

"When we goin' to be relieved, lieutenant?" asked Blimp.

"Sergeant!"

"Here, sir."

"Direct the artillery to shell the border of that wood. Tell battalion that Captain Grimm's been wounded. Tell 'em we need reënforcements." The officer turned to Blimp. "We'll probably be relieved sometime before morning."

Blimp and Ditty groaned. "A nice mess, ain't it?" said the former.

"Yeah, you look like a mess yourself," observed Ditty. "I guess the last slum we had didn't agree with you, huh?"

"They wasn't enough of it to disagree, you ham! How come you didn't bring this here restaurant over here with you?" he demanded, turning to François. "We need one now, bad."

The Frenchman smiled. "My friend, lie on the stummick; then you will not feel the hungry, and you get some rest." He paused and looked at the late afternoon sun. "Ah, this has been long, hard day for fight. Maybe in two, three hour' we come some relieve."

There was a roar like a close-up thunderstorm from the artillery, and in a moment the shells were winging their way above the heads of the infantry. For some ten minutes the barrage was kept up, the shells throwing up splinters, tree limbs and mud from the edge of the wood. Then the fire ceased abruptly, and the thinned wave of men arose to their feet.

The enemy artillery now opened up furiously, and though the shells flew high for the first few minutes, the range was presently lowered and the advancing men traveled through an inferno. The woods became nearer.

Intermittent clashes of rifle fire came from the fringe of trees; yet no Maxim fire raked them. Toward the left the line had reached the wood and clattering sounds of close-up work told of no mean resistance. Then the sweep-

ing, yelling line struck the forest with the full force of its rush, and noises foreign to the peaceful seeming wood turned the place into a heated pandemonium.

Somehow, for no particular reason, Blimp, Ditty, the two Frenchmen, and the still-surviving Gandy held closely together in a little twisting knot. The mêlée grew fiercer. Yet the five men, miraculously escaping bullets and dodging an occasional bayonet-thrust, pushed forward, while the Frenchmen with fanatic intensity attempted to run up their toll.

François, the elder, exchanged fire with a huge, raging antagonist, not ten feet away. A moment later the Frenchman called out in a voice that pierced the tumult, *"Dix-huit!"*

Cramming a clip into his rifle Blimp laughed in a half-stricken way and spoke to Ditty at his side. "Them frogs is cracked. Did you hear this here François? He's got his eighteenth notch an' is tellin' the world all about it."

But Ditty was intent on his temporarily-jammed shaut-shaut. Then he worked his weapon into action again, and the five men pushed through another clump of bushes, where the younger Frenchman came face to face with near-disaster. But his slim, two-foot bayonet parried a lunge which was accompanied with a guttural grunt, and after a moment of work, wherein metal clashed dully on metal, the younger man shouted in panting triumph:

"Vingt-trois!"

"Gosh!" said Blimp, his lips foam-flecked from exertion, "that means twenty-three, don't it? They didn't neither of 'em take a notch for that machine-gunning baby."

Ditty demanded a shaut-shaut clip and regarded his companion with mild contempt. "You dizzy too, you ham? Let 'em count—These cartridges is all stuck with wet paper."

"They been on the ground in a sack," explained Blimp. "Here's a clean clip —duck!"

A screaming .77 crashed through the trees and smashed into a tearing explosion a dozen feet to the rear of the two men. Unscathed, they jumped forward and followed Gandy and the two Frenchmen who had disappeared in the maze of undergrowth ahead. They stumbled along for fifty or sixty yards, and then they saw the trio, all of whom had cheeks to rifle stocks.

"We've cleaned 'em out, huh?" said Ditty, surprised at the lack of enemy resistance.

"Yeah," agreed Blimp doubtfully; "but Gandy an' them two dizzy frogs ain't stoppin'."

François turned and spoke to the two approaching men. "They are on a run, comrades!" he exclaimed jubilantly. And Louis, he has got another for the notch!"

The younger Frenchman protested. "I was not for sure who hit the man; I think maybe the good American here, he do the trick."

"I ain't keepin' count," said Gandy.

"We go on some more, you say yes?" suggested François. "It be dark sometime so soon and we don't see to shoot."

"Sure, let's go," said Blimp. "How many notches you guys got now?"

"One more for each," said Louis. "Unless we are for sure we do not make the count."

The five men edged forward carefully, yet the place appeared to be deserted. Presently, three hundred yards or more ahead, there seemed to appear an open field.

"We'll go just to the open," said François, "then it be not safe to go more. Maybe we have already got ahead of our line."

The party surveyed the wood on either side, and although no one appeared to be in immediate evidence,

there was a slight clatter some two hundred yards to the left.

"Everybody's movin' up," said Ditty, "only we can't see 'em. Let's go."

The enemy seemed to be beating a hasty retreat. A disabled machine gun was found abandoned, occasional stray rifles were strewn about. All indications pointed a a general evacuation of the wood. The forest itself had been torn by barrages and counter-barrages until the place became a maze of uprooted trees and churned earth.

Somehow the battle had seemed to die down of itself; and with the unnatural silence the place became eerie. The slight gloom which presaged the first faint beginnings of darkness added to the wild aspect of the wood and filled the men with vague apprehensions.

With due caution they pressed ahead to the edge of the forest, and there they saw a view which convinced them of their rashness. Long, obscure lines of enemy infantrymen, now grotesque shapes in the gathering darkness, were advancing steadily toward the wood.

The flanks of the enemy had already penetrated the forest and had disappeared toward the party's rear where, presently, sounds of furious firing could be heard. Ditty leveled his shaut-shaut toward the obscure forms of the advancing men, but the elder Frenchman caught his arm.

"It is useless, my friend," he cautioned. "We are caught off our guard; the only way we escape being made prisoners is to keep very quiet. Come."

The Frenchman led the way carefully into a dense growth of tangled underbrush which, with the descending shades of night, concealed them effectively.

"Do not fire at all," whispered François. "If we are take the prisoners we never get chance to make more notch'; we be done. I do not trust them to make us the prisoners. This day they have much losses. They have been falling back, and the high officer' they are not in the good humor. Do not move."

The line of the enemy broke up on reaching the wood, and detachments of twos and threes, and larger parties of a dozen or more entered the paths and openings in the trees, and pressed forward. Presently they disappeared to the rear of the five concealed men as silently as they had come.

"They are wait' for morning now," explained François. "To-morrow there be some hot fight, and if our lines are held up, we are done, for this war. But while we wait we get some sleep. You cannot fight without the rest

CHAPTER IV.

THEIR WEIGHT IN WILD CATS.

BLIMP and Ditty were made silent by their predicament. The erstwhile corporal ventured the whispered opinion, between epithets, that somebody was dizzy. Blimp agreed with equal vehemence, and added that maybe the frogs were not any more dizzy than some brainless tall guys whom he knew.

Within half an hour the five men had partaken of some of their rations, and the two Frenchmen were asleep. Gandy, the silent, was nodding. The wood about the hidden men seemed as deserted as another world. Presently Blimp and Ditty fell into that exhausted slumber which comes when nerves and muscles have been strained to the breaking point.

Throughout the night there were occasional bursts of machine-gun fire up and down the lines; yet except for this and intermittent counter-battery work by the artillery the night seemed quiet. But with the coming of dawn the front commenced to awaken. Blimp, who had been sleeping fitfully, felt a touch

on his arm and saw the elder Frenchman standing over him.

"It is near the morning, comrades," he cautioned, waking each man in turn. "Pretty quick we have work to do."

"Gee!" said Ditty. "It don't seem like I'd been cooshayin' more'n ten minutes. You sure it's morning, munseer?"

The Frenchman smiled. "Look into the east. Before long now—very quick—the attack commences. We maybe build some kind of trench for our defense—some of these old logs, yes. Then we throw some dirt on them—and *voila!* we are ready for the enemy."

"A nice fix!" mused Blimp, looking about him. "Enemies to the right of us, enemies to the left of us——"

"Yeah, 'left of us!' " ruminated Ditty, surveying their position. "What's left of us won't be worth countin'. Help Louis with that log, Private Blimp; you're fightin' for democracy an' about an hour of glory. Soon's it gets light they'll spot us—an' good-by milish!"

"We must be of the good cheer," said Francois. "Before this get over we have many of the enemy. And now we have some breakfast; you cannot pull trigger on the empty stomach."

"That's the only way we'll do any fightin' this mornin'," whispered Blimp, pointing to the right. "Look close an' you'll see a squad of devils givin' us the unglad eye. They ain't sure what's what; but they're goin' to find out mighty quick, I'm tellin' you."

"Ah, yes; and here is some more on this side," said Louis, with a suggestion of delight in his voice. "We make the big score this day, François."

But the elder brother merely nodded. As the light had increased the enemy had made out the nationality of the half-hidden men and were flattening themselves to fire. François raised his rifle, took careful aim, and a moment after his weapon had been discharged he called his score.

"Nineteen!"

At the firing the puzzled enemy gathered in larger numbers, looking askance at the concealed position. It was slightly demoralizing to have hostile troops in one's rear—probably they had somehow infiltrated through the lines. Moreover, there were French as well as Americans, it seemed.

It was most peculiar to have the troops of two nations together, although of course this happened sometimes. Yet it would be easy to clean them out; there might be ten or a dozen men here, by the firing. A rash thing for them to do, although they seemed to be behind some sort of barricade.

Their fire was unbelievably good, too! And those Frenchmen, in their frenzy, were calling out numbers. Well, a rush would carry them off their feet. But no; it had been tried on the other side, and an American or a Frenchman had operated one of those crude shaut-shauts with deadly effectiveness.

Yes, a goodly body of as stanch and true men as the fatherland had charged the place, and there was a line of these brave men, in twisted heaps, that reached almost to the point of defense.

Blimp, behind a Springfield that was hot to the touch, wiped the sweat from his brow and addressed Ditty. "Gosh!" he said, "I thought that last rush was goin' to take us. Did you see that guy comin' for me with his saw-tooth?" The point of it wasn't three steps from my windpipe when I got him."

The voice of Louis, the younger, rang out another number in panting triumph.

Like an echo, François' voice cried out in French and in it there was an unmistakable note of rivalry.

Ditty shook his head, wiping the

stain from a slight wound which had been caused by a flying splinter from their barricade. "Huh, them babies is even now. That's twenty-six apiece, ain't it?"

"I ain't keepin' count of mine," said the undemonstrative Gandy again with stolid contempt. "What's the idea o' yellin' that way?"

Toward the rear came sounds which heralded the opening of a major engagement.

"It's them enemies counterattackin'," said Blimp; "an' by the looks of the reënforcements that came through here last night, them doughboys is goin' to have a warm mornin'."

There was a quick flurry of grenades from some half-dozen of the enemy who had crawled up unawares. Yet the bombs were thrown prematurely, for the respect engendered by the besieged men's fire had halted them beyond grenade range. It was Ditty who spied the men a moment after the missiles had been thrown, and he swung his shaut-shaut over his shoulder and emptied the remainder of the clip.

The small group of men behind the barricade had now attracted the attention of a large number of the enemy, and it could be seen that some concerted effort was being planned to carry the place. Until now the position of the small number of men had been considered so untenable that no serious attempt had been made to rout them out. Angered by the losses, however, and puzzled by the stout defense put up by this handful of the enemy, mopping-up orders were issued.

The fire directed toward the place had now become intense. A bullet had torn its way through the hand and wrist of Gandy's right arm, putting him out of action. Blimp whispered hoarsely that the shaut-shaut ammunition was about exhausted, and cautioned Ditty to conserve his fire.

Yet the one-time corporal was blindly aggressive. "It won't do no good to wait," he said. "Shoot when you see something to shoot at. After that it don't matter. They'll never take us prisoners."

A spray of machine-gun bullets cut the leaves above their heads, and Ditty emptied his clip toward the half-concealed gunner. The two Frenchmen, crouched behind the bullet-ridden logs, worked their bolts frantically, shouting their toll with leather-lunged intensity. Despite their desperate situation the brothers' firing became a contest.

"François!" cried the younger, speaking English with the speed of French. "You got him—one more and we be the same! That was close! Keep down; not so high, François! Did you get him?"

"With you, Louis, I am even."

"*Magnifique,* François! Good, good!" Louis shouted in reply.

Wild sounds of fighting came from the rear; yet the enemy seemed to be holding. A string of Maxims could be heard in a screeching medley, mingled with the equally frantic rappings of a half-score of shaut-shauts and the faster pur of a half-dozen Hotchkiss guns. With these sounds came the clamoring crackle of rifle fire, the snapping roar of grenades, and over all the furious drumming of artillery.

During this the two Frenchmen continued wildly shouting their scores.

Ditty snatched Gandy's rifle. "This side. They're comin' in a bunch! They know the shaut-shaut ain't workin'!"

There goes Louis scoring again!" shouted Blimp. "That shaut-shaut's empty, Gandy!"

"Quick! before we go!" With swiftly working fingers Louis crammed a clip into his rifle. "Now! François! We must have a larger score.

Despite Gandy's bullet-smashed and numbed right hand, he rolled onto his

side, pulled a filled clip from the inside of his shirt, grabbed the shaut-shaut, touched the lever releasing the spent clip, and snapped the new one in place.

A rush of gray-green-clad men neared the position, bayonets extended, voices raised in deep-throated fury, determined to deal out death.

The muzzle of Gandy's shaut-shaut thrust itself across the low parapet, and remained motionless for a short moment. Then with a jerking roar it commenced to vibrate. The foremost men went down heavily. The muzzle was traversed slightly, and the rush crumpled into moving heaps and motionless heaps.

There were muffled shouts and louder shouts in the rear of the five men. An irregular line of khaki-clothed figures broke from the tangle of woods and pushed forward in an engulfing wave.

One of the Frenchmen shouted again.

"Them dizzy fools is even once more. Where'd you get that spare clip, Gandy?"

"One that was left in a dropped *musette* bag when we come forward last night. Thought it might come in handy; I was savin' it."

"Boy, you sure did some good savin'. Look at the bunch of them babies we got all together!"

"What are you men doing here?" said an American officer, running up.

"We made a little mistake, lieutenant," said Blimp. "Huh? We been takin' in big numbers. These here French munseers start it. Good gosh! that ham of a Gandy's gone and fainted."

THE DECOY HERD

AFTER cattle have "run wild" in isolated and out-of-the-way valleys for a couple of years, the sight or scent of man sends them into wild stampedes. When the West was less settled, capturing these cattle was difficult.

Only a few of the animals could be caught and lassoed, for they all would "hit for the horizon," when cowboys appeared.

Therefore, a decoy herd of cattle was often used to capture their wild brethren. Partly tamed beasts, accustomed to men and not prone to stampede, were placed in dense brush and held there. The man in charge of operations then would lead his cowboys off in search of fresh, wild-cattle sign.

When desirable animals, in sufficient quantity, were sighted, the punchers tried to encircle them, so that the frightened beasts would start in a mad rush toward the decoy herd. It was fierce and frantic riding, the yelling cowboys endeavoring to guide the panic-stricken wild cattle in the desired direction.

When their wild brethren crashed into the herd of decoy cattle, there was usually much excitement. Sometimes an overenthusiastic cowpuncher, not recognizing the partly tamed animals for what they were, would continue his howling. In that case, the whole bunch of animals would then start off for somewhere.

Ordinarily, though, the decoy herd, accustomed to men, would mill around, aided by the cowboys. If the wild cattle tried to break away from the main herd, they were driven back.

After a time, their continued efforts to escape being thwarted, the wild cattle became exhausted. Soon, they too lost some of their fear of men. So the decoy herd was increased in size until it became unwieldy, when some of the animals were sold, and the same procedure began again.



Broken Fangs

By

Lawrence Wm. Pedrose

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

A DOG'S OWNER?

THE first heavy snow of winter swept down the canyon on the breast of a bitter arctic wind and enveloped the settlement of Silver Tip. It changed the whole contour of the land and left only white humps to mark the miners' cabins, from which protruded rusty sheet-iron smokestacks that stood out from the drifts at grotesque angles.

"Worst snow since ninety-eight," declared Elie Higgens, storekeeper, to the group of men surrounding the stove in his establishment. "But I knew the way she started, quiet and easylike, she'd be a dinger!"

"I b'n thinking," spoke up Knute Martenson, who lived on the bank of the frozen creek behind the store, "we won't get any caribou now. Snow's ten feet deep here, if it's an inch, and that means five feet in the mountains. There ain't goin' to be any caribou run unless we get a chinook wind to cut down the drifts."

"Yes, there will," argued Tom Flynn, grizzled old sourdough, who had seen ice go out of the Yukon before most of the other men were born. "But they'll keep to the highlands. They'll be showin' up around Mills Lake most anytime now. If we want meat, though, we'll have to get it ourselves. Indians can't be hired to go out in this kind of weather. I vote we make up a huntin' party."

"Nothin' doin'," cut in James, another miner. "I crossed over the divide last fall and shot a caribou. Then along came a Federal man and arrested me. It wasn't a caribou at all, but a government reindeer.

"Cost me a hundred bucks and two weeks' working time. If there's any huntin' to be done, leave it to the Indians. I'd rather pay twenty-five cents a pound for my caribou, and if it turns out to be reindeer, some one else'll fight it out with the government!"

"Well, why don't you go out after reindeer, then probably you'd get caribou?" suggested Higgens. A laugh went round the circle. "But it's going to be a serious matter if we don't get fresh meat," added the storekeeper, with a frown. "I didn't stock up very heavily. I've got sow-belly and bacon. After that's gone, you guys'll have to snare rabbits and ptarmigan."

There was a sound of muffled footfalls outside the building. A tall, lean Indian wearing mittens, mukluks and a reindeer parka entered.

"John Coffee!" exclaimed Higgens. "Speaking of meat—here's our pot hunter now. *Klahowya,* chief!"

"How," grunted the Indian. He approached the stove, removed his mittens, and pushed back the hood of his parka. His small, keen black eyes took in the circle of men, appraisingly. Accepting a proffered seat he drew from his pocket a quaint pipe made from a twisted root and eyed the empty bowl tentatively.

Tobacco was offered. He took some, filled the pipe, and looked round for a match. One was forthcoming.

After lighting the pipe and puffing leisurely on it for a moment, he broached the object of his visit.

"You want meat?" he said in fairly good English. It was more a statement than a query. "My people camp over by Stampede Lake. My young men say some moose, some caribou in the hills. Snow deep. How much meat you want, and how much you pay?"

"Same as last year," Higgens answered. "We can use two thousand pounds, and we'll give two-bits a pound. That is," he hastened to add, "if you don't boost the weight, like you did last time."

The Indian grunted and shook his head. "Snow deep," he reiterated. "Bad hunting. Have to haul meat long way—mebbe carry it. Must get dollar a pound."

"You go to Hades!" exploded Flynn. "We'll go hungry before we'll pay a dollar a pound! What do you think this is—the Klondike?"

The Indian's eyes sparkled but the expression on his leathery face did not change. "Rabbits pretty scarce this year," he hinted.

The white men opened a heated argument. Some were in favor of granting the Indian's demand, others vowed they'd starve first. The spirited discussion was interrupted by the arrival of another visitor.

A small man wearing a canvas parka entered at the door, followed by three great wolf dogs, one of them black-and-white husky and the others silver-tipped malemutes.

"Jim West!" cried the men, forgetting their lively argument and greeting the newcomer heartily. "How's things over the divide, Jim? Much snow in the mountains?"

"Howdy," grinned West. "Things are O. K. with me. Four feet of snow in the timber. Almost had to break trail for the dogs."

The Indian had gotten upon his feet and was studying one of the malemutes. He crossed to the dog and looked it over critically. The dog snarled silently up at him. Apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, he turned to the brute's master.

"That my dog," he said.

"The hell it is!" retorted West. "How do you know?"

The Indian dismissed the query with a shrug. "That my dog," he repeated.

With the quickness of a panther, the white man sprang to his side, grasped the dog in question by the jaws and opened its mouth. The miners ejaculated with surprise and indignation as the gleaming teeth and red mouth of the animal were exposed to their view.

The dog's four large canine teeth had been broken off close to the gums.

"And I suppose this is your trademark?" West demanded hotly.

The Indian jerked his head downward and upward in the affirmative.

"Why, you devil!" gritted West. "Any man that'd do that to a dog isn't fit for wolf bait!"

There was fire in his eyes and he stood tensed as if expecting—hoping for—a belligerent move on the part of the Indian. So ludicrous did it seem

for the man to be denouncing in fighting tones a native who towered head and shoulders above him, that one of the miners in the audience laughed outright. An oblique glance from West's steely eyes silenced the mirth.

"He is a murderer," explained the Indian, undisturbed by the white man's scathing remarks. "He bite my squaw, so I take a stone and break his teeth so he cannot do it again. Where you find him?"

"I didn't find him," corrected West. He found me. He came to my camp near Stampede Lake last summer. His teeth were broken, his mouth was all torn, and he had deep cuts from a whip. I felt sorry for the poor thing and doctored him up. He elected to stay with me. See how ferocious your murder dog is now?"

With a soft word to the dog, he caught it just behind its muscular shoulders, raised it upon its hind legs, and shook it. The malemute submitted to the demonstration but, like his kind, showed no inclination to be playful.

"He my dog; he come with me," said the Indian, imperiously. He gave a guttural command, and the dog backed away, its lips peeled back defiantly from its mutilated teeth.

"Hold on there," cried West. "You had that dog and you didn't treat him square, so he left you. I don't steal from any man. I want him and I'll give you twenty dollars for him."

The Indian shook his head emphatically. "No sell," he grunted.

West turned to the miners. "How about it, fellows? This bird tortured the dog. We ought to smash his own teeth and drive him out of camp with a whip. I'm naming him a fair price, but I'll double it. Call a miners' court, Higgens, and decide this!"

The storekeeper promptly arose and summoned several of the men by name. The group retired to the far end of the room. A whispered discussion, punctuated by vigorous gestures, followed. After several minutes, the men returned, Higgens, as judge, rendered the verdict.

"Property is property, Jim," he said regretfully. "You've let your heart run away with your head. The Indian takes the dog. Whether we fancy the idea or not—a man is entitled to beat up his dog—once. If that sort of thing becomes chronic, well——

West's face turned white, but he accepted the miners' decision without verbal protest.

"Oh, Jim," spoke up James, seeking to relieve the tension of the moment, "the Indians are demanding a dollar a pound for caribou. John Coffee says his young men won't bring it in for less. Can you help us out?"

West turned his back on the Indian and strode to the stove. "I'm no butcher," he responded briskly, "but I'll put a crimp in that sort of graft any time. I'll get you a sled load at two-bits a pound, if one of you will come with me. The rest must help tote the carcasses down from the summit."

"I'll bring the meat for two-bits a pound," spoke up the Indian. "Mebbe my young men won't find the snow too deep."

"Ho, ho," roared Hendricks, another miner, "your young bucks have grown strong legs all at once! You're out of luck, Johnny; the contract goes to West. Take your dog and shuffle along home—but we hope he tears you up and eats you before you get there!"

The Indian shot a venomous glance at his white rival and asked for a piece of rope. Higgens secured a short length of stout cord for him. It was West who fastened the rope about the dog's neck, making certain it would not hurt.

As he finished the job, he gave the animal a surreptitious embrace. There was a mist in his eyes as the Indian

dragged the dog to the door and went out without a parting word for the hostile white miners.

CHAPTER II.

GETTING CARIBOU.

TWO men toiled slowly along the face of a mountain wooded with scattered hemlock, planting their snowshoes firmly at each upward step so they packed a trail for two great wolf dogs that dragged a sled after them. The men's parkas lay tucked under the lashings of the sled, but the going was hard and they were perspiring freely.

"I think you was foolish in the head for taking only big dogs, West," opined the man in the rear, a round-faced Saxon, as a breathing spell was called on a shelf of the mountainside. "But the farder I come the more I see you was schmart. How you can climb so well mit your short legs is a mystery to me."

West smiled at his companion, who was no taller than himself but broad-shouldered and heavily muscled.

"Well, Zemer," he returned, "these legs are like yours; they reach from my pockets to the ground and no more.

"The snow is getting lighter up here, but the sky looks threatening, and we'll probably have another storm to-night. If we get meat before dusk, we'll head right back. So it might not be a bad idea to pick the best route and blaze it as we go. You mark the trees on your left. I'll catch those on the right."

"But say!" pursued Zemer. "When you have only two dogs along, why did you bring an extra harness?"

"Dunno," said West. "Superstitious, I guess. Maybe we'll break one, and a spare will come in handy."

"I think," muttered Zemer, "you have weevils in your coco!"

The hunters proceeded, trappers' tomahawks in hand, cutting chips from the trees at short intervals. They had ascended the mountain another several hundred yards and were nearing the summit when West called attention to a short, broad snowshoe track at his feet.

"Indian racket made that," he declared, after a brief examination. Twilight was approaching, but the footprint was clearly revealed. "Looks like John Coffee or one of his bucks is spying on us. What do you suppose the sly old bird is up to?"

"I bet me I know," exclaimed Zemer. "Old Chonnie and his family have a bunch of caribou cornered up here. The old geezer saw how much meat he had and went down to Silver Tip to make a dicker for it.

"The Indians corral the caribou sometimes. They make a long fence and run them into a pocket like sheep. They hold them maybe two, three days, and kill them as they want them."

Twilight darkened to dusk as they reached the summit of the mountain. The climb had taken much longer than they had anticipated. On the summit the wind had swept the stony ground bare in places and it was possible to travel without snowshoes.

A plateau several hundred yards wide lay before the men. Over this mountain lay the route of the caribou herds which migrated southward with the beginning of winter. The hunters took their rifles from beneath the sled cover and filled their pockets with cartridges.

"Listen!" West suddenly exclaimed.

The men strained forward, with every faculty alert. From some distance ahead and to the left came a heavy rumble like ice going out of a gorge, contrasted by another sound that was like dry sticks being slapped together.

"Caribou!" cried Zemer, excitedly. "They're coming up the other side of the mountain!"

He dashed forward, and West paused only long enough to order the dogs to lie down before he followed.

A few moments later West heard a

sharp grunt ahead, and the impact of a falling body. He found Zemer sitting on the ground, holding his stomach and gulping for air.

The obstruction which had caught the unwary hunter in the midriff and flung him back was a pole fastened waist-high between two hemlocks and screened with brush. From the two trees, in a line running north and south, were other poles and frames of birch withes reaching as far as West could see in the half light.

"A fence!" he gritted. "Old Johnny hasn't corralled the caribou herd yet, but he plans to run it into a trap and make a real slaughter. Some sportsmanship, that!" He ducked under the obstruction. "It'd serve the old geezer right if we beat him to the game!"

Zemer recovered quickly from his fall, and the men hastened onward. The caribou herd was near, but they did not need their eyes to tell its location. The sound of pounding hoofs was like thunder now, and this and the clatter of horns drowned out all other noises.

The vanguard of the herd burst into sight not a stone's throw away from the men. The animals were heading almost straight toward them. At the same moment scattered snowflakes began to fall, making it impossible to distinguish individual deer. The men threw up their rifles and began shooting.

A large bull detached itself from the herd and loomed up before the men like an antlered ghost. West, at a whimsical thought lowered his rifle.

"Say, Zemer," he asked, worriedly, "see anything queer? There's white socks on that bull. Do you suppose this is a stray herd of government reindeer?"

"Hoomph!" grunted Zemer, laconically. "I don't see nobody on their backs!"

The hunters emptied the magazines of their difles, then hastily reloaded. But during the short respite, the herd had swung at right angles and was moving off at great speed. Three more shots apiece the men were able to fire with any degree of accuracy, then the game was lost in the blur of the growing snowstorm.

"Rotten shooting," observed West, when the net result of the barrage had been determined. Between them, the men had bagged seven caribou—four bulls and three cows. "Squaws could have done better with stones!"

"What do you expect?" retorted Zemer. "I remember what George Washington said, and hold until I can see 'the whites of their eyes.' Then you get buck fever. Next time I go hunting with you, I get me a machine gun!"

"And I'll bet you never hit a deer!" laughed West.

Resting their rifles against a tree, the men dragged the carcasses into a saucerlike depression of the rocks, chopped down a tree, and built a fire so they would have light for skinning the game. Snow was falling thickly now and they made haste to prepare the meat.

An hour later, when they had just completed the skinning and cleaning of their third carcass, they heard the whisk of snowshoes. Looking up they discovered John Coffee, rifle across his arm, and two Indian youths, armed with muskets, approaching.

John Coffee noted in a swift glance that the white men's guns were resting against the tree, out of reach. He halted majestically by the fire.

"Why did you drive away the caribou?" he demanded. His tone was ugly, insinuating, and there was homicide in his eyes. "White men steal Indians' meat——"

From a kneeling position beside the deer he had been skinning, West sprang like a wild cat at the threatening native, grasped his rifle, and sent him flying with a well-directed kick. He covered

the other Indians before they could bring their guns into action, and compelled them to drop the weapons. He gathered up the guns, pumped the cartridges from the rifle, thrust the muzzles of the muskets into the snow, then tossed them back to their owners.

"When an Indian thinks he can bulldoze us its time for some one else to hold the dice," he gritted. "You birds are *hyas hum* to me. Now get out!"

John Coffee glared, then grunted to his tribesmen and strode away into the storm. The two younger Indians shook their fists at the white man and scowled darkly, but followed their chief.

Zemer procured the rifles leaning against the tree and laid them within reach.

"I don't like that look old Chonnie gave me," he said. "My people met some of those fellows back in Minnesota before I was a boy. 'When you see red in an Indian's eye,' old Papa Zemer used to say, 'plug him before he gets you!' "

There was no further interruption while the game was skinned and dressed. When the last carcass was finished, West hastened along the back trail to where the dogs and sled had been left. Already an additional two inches of snow had fallen, and haste was essential.

He came upon the sled in inky darkness and nearly stumbled over it. To his surprise, three dogs got up out of the snow and shook themselves. With a strange thrill, he crossed to the third dog and felt of it. It was a big malemute, and it submitted to his touch without protest. Instinctively he reached for its mouth. A cry of pleasure escaped from him.

It was the dog with the broken fangs!

There were streaks of matted fur along the prodigal one's back. West struck a match and examined the singular markings. He swore beneath his breath as he recognized their character. They were cruel cuts from a lash which had bitten deeply into the dumb brute's flesh.

Five minutes later, when West drove the team up to the fire, with the new dog in the lead, Zemer rubbed his eyes at sight of three great wolf dogs where only two had been before.

"Hey," he exclaimed, "where did you get it—pick it off a tree?"

"No," chuckled West. "Borrowed it from old John Coffee. And he'll let me keep it this time if he has any regard for his health!"

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERY TRAIL.

THE storm increased in intensity as the men loaded the sled, and it became apparent they could not make the return trip in the darkness. They finally decided to make camp. Three skins of the slain caribou were hung as a protection for the fire, and the men made beds with the other pelts.

Weary from their day's labor, they were soon asleep, with the dogs bedded down beside them.

West slept lightly, on the qui vive for wolves, but the thickness of the storm and the low temperature kept the scent of fresh meat from the corsairs of the hills. Nothing disturbed the men's rest until just before daybreak, when West bolted to a sitting position, wide awake and alert, at a yell from Zemer.

He shook the snow from his bed, sprang out, and crossed to his companion. He laughed heartily as he realized the cause of the other's alarm.

Zemer had rolled himself into two caribou hides, with the fur turned inward. When he went to sleep the pelts were still warm and pliable. But during the night they had frozen, presenting a form-fitting casing about his body which held him like in a steel vise, and he was unable even to move his arms.

"Yah, laugh!" he protested, as West rolled him over and split the casing with his tomahawk. "Show your dumbness! But think what a fine fix I'd be in if I was alone!"

"*You* think about it!" retorted West. "You should have known better than to roll up in green pelts like that. Three chehcachos did that down the Yukon in '98, and the wolves got them all. About the only thing that'd get a man out of one of those jackets is a can opener."

Six inches of new snow had fallen, and the storm showed no signs of abating. The men partook of food they had brought along from Silver Tip, then harnessed the dogs for the homeward journey. In the dark gray dawn they got under way.

They crossed the level plateau quickly and passed through the Indian fence. Blazes they had made on the trees indicated the route down the mountainside.

They had progressed only a hundred yards when the new lead dog balked at a turn of the trail and insisted on swinging into a thicket of hemlocks to the right. West, who was breaking trail, got the team headed back in the direction desired, but the leader again swung to the right.

With growing annoyance, he got the team straightened out again, but in the following few minutes he had a continuous struggle with the stubborn lead dog. So insistent was the dog, it attempted to thrash its mates because they were reluctant to follow it off the trail. Finally driven to exasperation, West removed the dog from the team, took it ahead a short distance, and cuffed it vigorously.

"What foolishness!" exclaimed Zemer, disgustedly. "Can't you lick him as well here as out there?"

"I never chastise a dog in sight of his mates," explained West, as he hooked up the leader's traces again. "It humiliates him and robs him of his pride. A dog without pride is worthless."

"Pooh!" was his companion's retort.

But when the journey was resumed, the lead dog didn't seem to have learned his lesson. He persisted in swinging off the trail.

"Say," said Zemer, finally, "there's something fishy about this!"

The sled at that moment passed over a hump which shot it forward twenty feet. Zemer heaved on the gee pole and narrowly avoided a tree which would have wrecked the vehicle. West was walking at the side of the lead dog, so intent on holding it to the trail that he neglected to look ahead.

Suddenly the dog whined and laid down. West, carried forward by his momentum, felt himself falling. Instinctively he twisted his body, and, by good fortune, caught the dog's harness. Zemer dashed forward and found him hanging over the face of a precipice, whose black depths were lost in swirling snow below.

A heave from Zemer's powerful arms, and West was safely on the trail again. The men looked at each other, then into the deep crevasse from which they had escaped death by a hair's breadth. For the first time they understood the queer actions of the lead dog.

They had been following a false trail, established by some one who sought to slay them, and the dog had been struggling in vain to swing them back upon the proper route.

CHAPTER IV.

SLASHING FANGS.

IN silence the sled was turned round and the back track followed to the point where the dog had first tried to leave the trail. West waded into the thicket of hemlocks, and it fell away at his touch. The trees were without roots.

As the hemlocks toppled, there was revealed the figure of John Coffee, standing a rod away, his rifle in the crook of his arm and a look of murderous rage and disappointment on his face. It was a tense moment.

The guns of both West and Zemer were lying on the sled, where they had been slipped under the lashings of the load.

The white men knew their fate lay in the hands of the vengeful Indian. He could make away with them, out here on the lonely mountainside, and the crime might never be revealed. But West was thinking rapidly. If he felt fear, he concealed it effectually. He knew his and Zemer's life hung by a slender thread. He staked the issue on his understanding of redskin psychology. With a reckless swagger, he crossed to the Indian.

John Coffee swung the muzzle of the rifle so it pointed at his enemy, and his thumb was on the hammer of the weapon. A snap of the finger would send a lead missile tearing through the white man. West, smiling boldly, watched the thumb and saw it tense.

With a very natural gesture, he raised his hand as if to brush back a stray lock of hair. Then, with a movement quicker than the eye could follow, he whipped his fur cap into the face of the Indian and side-stepped. John Coffee instinctively ducked and closed his eyes. The rifle barked, but the bullet went wild. The next instant West's hands closed upon the gun.

A kick in the midriff caused the native to double up and release the weapon. West flung it away, then tore into the Indian like a wild cat, using hands and feet. John Coffee fumbled at his belt and procured a heavy skinning knife, but dropped it when West caught his arm and gave it a severe twist.

Then he sought protection from the smaller man's stinging punches by throwing his arms about West.

At this moment Zemer acted. The Teuton noted that the lead dog was straining at its tugs. With a grin, he bent and unhooked its belly strap. It jerked its head from the collar and shot down the hill slope toward the struggling men.

John Coffee saw it coming and, flinging West aside, raised his arm imperiously and shouted in the native tongue. But the mastery he had held over the animal had been lost with the last brutal beating he had given it. It leaped upon him, a silent, savage avenger.

Coffee tried to protect himself with his arms, and it ripped his parka to shreds as it slashed, bounced back, and slashed again. Then it tore at his flesh. He yelled for assistance, but the white men did not interfere.

At last, realizing his only hope lay in flight, he turned and went bounding like a deer down the slope, his torn garments trailing him like streamers. The dog followed for a few rods, then, at a shout from West, returned.

"Jim," said Zemer, with an apologetic laugh, as West rejoined him. "I didn't say much, but I take back all I thought about that dumb dog. He not only has more sense as we have, but he knows better how to handle Indians!"

"You said a mouthful," chuckled West, and he patted the shoulders of the dog as he slid the collar over his head and refastened the belly strap of its harness.

Appearances Matter

The customer at the small restaurant called the waiter.

"What's the meaning of this?" he exclaimed. "Yesterday you gave me a portion twice as large as this."

"Where did you sit yesterday, sir?"

"By the window."

"Oh, that accounts for it. We always give people by the window larger portions. It's an advertisement."

The Missing Toe

by H.M. Sutherland



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

THE DOG AND THE BOY.

THROUGH the slowly lifting morning mists which clung reluctantly to the beds of rhododendron on each side of the trail, strode five silent, thin-lipped hillsmen. A few paces to the rear trudged a boy of ten leading on a leathern leash a yellow-and-white shepherd dog of unusual size. Two of the men, both bearded giants, carried shotguns and another balanced a rifle carelessly across his forearm. This gave them a sinister appearance.

The boy, who was palpably making a supreme effort to emulate his elders, seemed to be finding it extremely difficult for his lower lip trembled pathetically. Often he stumbled because of the mist of tears which would gather in his eyes. His cheeks, tear-stained and grimy, were flushed, and one of his small fists was doubled while the other clenched the leash with a grip that would be hard to loosen.

In spite of these visible evidences of fear and grief, however, the light of defiance kindled in his large, dark eyes and the glance he shot at the backs of the men before him was filled with hate and vindictiveness. Covertly he shortened the leash and then his right hand dropped and his fingers strayed affectionately over the shepherd's head.

"I won't let 'em, King," he whispered fiercely. "You didn't do it—you didn't."

One of the bearded giants halted and wheeled back toward the boy. "Keep up, Bud!" he ordered sharply.

With a quick glance at the sun breaking across the purple crest of the Cumberlands overhead, the hillman increased his own pace slightly.

"The cou't sets at nine," he drawled, "and Josh don't like to wait."

Some thirty minutes later they reached the forks of the creek and halted at old Jake Yaunce's store. The proprietor, accompanied by his lifelong crony, St. Bead Starr, appeared in the doorway and stared questioningly at them. St. Bead, sage and astute patriarch of the hill country and known and loved throughout the Cumberlands, stepped out on the porch and greeted the visitors affably.

"Howdy, boys!" His glance came to a rest upon the two bearded leaders. "You and Ranse havin' a leetle trouble, Bart?"

"Dog trial," replied Ranse Cantrell laconically. "His dog killed a passel of my sheep."

"Old King?" St. Bead gazed at the boy and his dog in surprise.

"He says 'twas King," declared Bart Pearson, accenting the pronoun. "I ain't plum con-vinced yet. That's how come we're havin' a trial here to-day."

"Thar's plenty of evidence," grunted Ranse, with a shrug.

"Josh holdin' cou't here to-day?" queried St. Bead. "Funny, me and Jake hadn't heard about it."

"Trial's set fo' nine o'clock." Bart gazed speculatively toward the sun. "Ort to be near that time now."

St. Bead nodded and then sauntered over and stood looking down at the boy and dog. Into his fine old eyes there crept a soft light and the smile that played about his mouth was in itself a promise.

"Did King do it, Bud?" he asked as if the boy's words were final.

"No, sir." There was no doubt in the boy's mind. "Look in his eyes—an' tell fer yoreself." He caught the dog's head and lifted it until its gaze met St. Bead's squarely and fearlessly. Then the old hillsman studied the boy's grimy face, and the pleading he saw there would not be denied.

"No," he said with conviction, "King didn't do it, Bud. I'm shore of that, but how are we goin' to prove it to Josh Haines? Did Ranse see King runnin' the sheep?"

"No. He ain't got no proof but some tracks in the mud. King might 'a' made the tracks, but he didn't kill the sheep. Why—why he couldn't hurt nothin'."

"I believe you, Bud, and I'll do all I can to keep 'em from shootin' King," promised St. Bead, turning away.

The quintet were lounging in various attitudes of repose in front of the store waiting of the arrival of Josh Haines, the justice of the peace in that district. Surreptitiously St. Bead signaled old Jake and the two disappeared inside the store out of earshot of the others.

"Thar's trouble afoot, Jake," asserted St. Bead quietly. "Ever since that lawsuit they had six or seven years ago, thar's been bad feelin' betwixt Bart and Ranse, and this business to-day is more'n likely to bring it to a head. I don't believe King done it—he's too good a stock dog—and if they do shoot King I reckon they'll have to shoot Bud, too. Thar ain't no deeper love than that which a leetle feller has for his dog, and I reckon, Jake, me and you'll have to take a hand in this."

"Sort of risky, ain't it?" queried old Jake uncertainly. "Bart and Ranse, when they're mad, won't do to mess with."

St. Bead nodded in grim acquiescence. "They're that, but mebbe we can do somethin'—talk with Josh or somethin'." He was silent for a space of several seconds. "I never saw a sheep-killin' dog," he observed thoughtfully, "who could look you square in the eye. Thar's somethin' sneakin' about 'em. Josh ort to know that. No, I'm right shore, Jake, that King didn't kill Ranse's sheep."

"What proof has Ranse got?" demanded Jake.

"Some tracks, Bud says. I guess we'll have to wait until the trial starts before we know jest what we are up agin'."

The clumping of many feet in the doorway brought the two old men about and ended their speculations. In the van of the file advanced Joshua Haines, the gaunt, cadaverous justice of the peace and schoolmaster of No-Business, whose pedagogic appearance and pedantic speech were carried outside the schoolroom as well as within.

"With your permission, Mr. Yaunce," he said sententiously, "I will conduct this court of justice here. The in-

clemency of the weather forbids holding our court in the open air."

"Help yoreself," replied old Jake hospitably if a trifle unconventionally.

CHAPTER II.

MOUNTAIN DANGER.

WITH a dignity befitting his official position, Josh seated himself upon one of Jake's two easy-chairs near the stove, and with his foot shoved the other so that the light from the window fell directly upon it. A shrewd judge of human nature and motives, his keen insight more often than not penetrated the hillsman's mask of stoicism and studied indifference. It was evident that he wanted to watch the faces of the witnesses closely in order to arrive at his verdict.

From an inside pocket of his cavernous black coat he removed a legal document which he unfolded and perused carefully. When he had finished he polished his silver-rimmed glasses and leaned forward the patch of sunlight across the witness chair.

"The charges," he intoned gravely, "as put forth in this warrant, are to the effect that a large yellow-and-white shepherd dog, answering to the name of King, did, on the night of the twenty-second of this month, attack, slay, and mutilate five sheep which were the property of Ranse Cantrell. This dog, owned by Bart Pearson, has been placed under arrest and stands now before this bar of justice in which his guilt or innocence will be established. Is the accused present?"

Peering through his spectacles into the dim light of the room he at last discovered Bud and King standing together just inside the door.

"Bud, bring your dog up here," he ordered more gently than was his wont.

Clutching the leash and shuffling his feet uneasily Bud made his way slowly forward while King, sniffing at the new and curious odors in the building, kept almost abreast. On a box beside the court Bud dropped and the dog crouched at his feet. For the next thirty seconds or so the only sound in the room came from King. Unaccustomed to the heat of the stove, the dog panted noisily.

Seemingly forgetful of the presence of the others, the old justice of the peace gazed thoughtfully and benevolently upon the pair at his feet, dividing his attention between the dog and Bud. Then with a shake of his head he straightened his shoulders and faced the semicircle of spectators.

"Ranse Cantrell," he said sharply, "you preferred the charges against the accused. You will tell this court all that you know about this case, and then, if you have any other witnesses we will hear them. After that the defense will be heard. Hold up your hand and be sworn."

The oath administered, Ranse lowered himself into the witness chair which groaned protestingly under his two hundred pounds of bone and sinew. His gnarled hand stroked his scraggy, black beard as if he were weighing his words before speaking, and his bushy eyebrows were contracted so that St. Bead caught only the light of the steel-blue eyes glinting through the slits.

Ranse's glance went slowly over the room and came to a halt upon the bulky form of his brother, "Bad" 'Lige, who carried the rifle still balanced across his arm. No signal passed between them, but to St. Bead there seemed to be a world of understanding in that fleeting glance.

Bad 'Lige was the one man in the crowd that St. Bead feared. Only recently returned from serving a long term in the State prison for manslaughter, and known throughout the hill country as a superb marksman, his name was one with which to conjure. His menacing deadliness was accentuated by the pallor of the prison which marked him, and

hate of his fellowmen who sent him there still smoldered in his eyes.

"Now tell the court," repeated Haines, "all that you know about this case. Leave nothing out."

At this point St. Bead stepped forward and stood near the witness. "I know it ain't none of my business, yore honor," he declared addressing Haines, "but if ye have no objections I'd like to help out a leetle in this trial."

"As legal counsel?" queried Haines, raising his eyebrows.

St. Bead chuckled. "Ye might call it that. I ain't a lawyer as far as that goes, but I reckon I do know a whole lot about—dogs."

"Best keep outta this," came a low warning over his shoulder and St. Bead stiffened unconsciously for it was Bad 'Lige speaking.

"Which side will you represent?" demanded the court, apparently granting the request.

"Both sides," replied St. Bead instantly. "I know Ranse and Bart want the right thing done in this trial. If King is guilty Bart will be willin' for him to be shot, and if he ain't Ranse will agree to let him go. I figgered I might help a leetle in gettin' this business straightened out, an' everybody satisfied."

It was quickly apparent that the spectators as well as the principals, with the probable exception of Bad 'Lige, were in accord with this procedure. To practically all of them St. Bead had at some time or other given good advice, had befriended them in time of need, and gone to their aid when difficulties faced them. In truth, the old patriarch had been dubbed by a facetious attorney at the county seat "the patron saint of the Cumberlands" and from that time on he had been known only as St. Bead.

"Your suggestion is agreeable to the court," announced Haines, after a short deliberation. "Do I hear an objection from the prosecution or the defense? No? Then go ahead with your evidence, Ranse."

Bud leaned forward tensely, watching Ranse's face with an expression of mingled hate and apprehension, but King, evidently having lost interest in the proceedings, dropped his head on his outstretched paws and centered his attention on St. Bead. Ranse shifted his position, palpably conscious of the fact that every eye was upon him.

"I dunno as I can tell ye anything that happened on the night that them sheep was killed—night afore last. I never heard no noise or barkin' or anything as I remember of. First I heard about the sheep was when Brother 'Lige here come in a few minutes afore breakfast and told me he had seen five of my sheep layin' dead at the edge of the swamp in the north pasture.

"We had our breakfast and then we went up thar. 'Twas jest like he said. Thar was five of my ewes killed, three at the upper end of the swamp in about ten or fifteen feet of each other whar they had sort of got stuck in the mud and the dog had no trouble comin' in on 'em. Then thar was another 'long down about the middle of the swamp, and one at the lower end.

"I knowed as soon as I saw their throats that it was the work of a sheep-killin' dog. I got to lookin' around for evidence, and I found some tracks in the mud—dog tracks—in two places in the soft mud along the edges of the swamp. In one place these tracks was thick whar he had brought down the last sheep, and then the tracks headed out in the direction of the woods on the ridge above.

"As soon as I took a close look I knowed 'twas Pearson's King as done it. The tracks was plain as the nose on yore face and I couldn't make no mistake about 'em. Straightway me and 'Lige goes over to Bart Pearson's and that dog thar was layin' on the porch when we went in. Thar was mud on his legs and feet then and the white

places on his breast and neck was stained with brown streaks and splotches. 'Twas stains from the sheep, as any man could tell.

"I started to shoot him then and thar, but I knowed Pearson'd take up for him, so I went to ye and swore out a warrant for him. I reckon that's all."

CHAPTER III.

A MATTER OF EVIDENCE.

THE recital seemed to make a profound impression upon the listeners, and St. Bead was convinced that Ranse had spoken the truth. Unconsciously the old hillsman found himself staring at King doubtfully, and then his gaze wandered to the boy. The expression of poignant pain and fear on Bud's face tightened the old man's lips to a thin line.

"You said, Ranse," questioned St. Bead, "that you recognized the tracks as King's as soon as ye saw 'em, didn't ye? How did ye know that?"

"The track was made by King's right front foot," replied Ranse, his smile of elation indicating that he was playing his trump card. "I reckon ever'body here remembers last winter when he got the middle toe of that foot cut off in a steel trap, and it set up p'isen, and they figgered they'd have to shoot him." There were several nods of confirmation among the spectators. "Well," continued Ranse with a hint of malicious joy in his tones, "the track in the mud shows that the middle toe of the right front foot is missin'."

Once more St. Bead's eyes wandered to the boy and his dog, and with a deep sigh he realized that the damning evidence was sufficient to bring conviction. That missing toe was proof conclusive, and for the first time St. Bead lost faith in the frank, open expression with which King had met his gaze half an hour earlier. And yet, somehow, he was not convinced of the prisoner's guilt.

There must be a mistake somewhere, but where? With a shrug of futility he glanced at Bud and found that his burning, defiant gaze had dropped from the witness and was centered on King with an expression of complete bewilderment and disbelief.

"The evidence is circumstantial and uncorroborated," declared Haines, mouthing the words in palpable enjoyment. "Did your brother notice those tracks also?"

"He did," replied Ranse.

Upon the witness stand Bad 'Lige practically repeated Ranse's story, and St. Bead made no effort to question him. King was doomed. In the face of this unquestionable evidence, St. Bead knew instinctively that nothing could be done. The grim lines about Bart Pearson's mouth, and helpless, appealing light in Bud's eyes made this realization more certain.

Bart Pearson made a supreme effort to offset the charges, but the best he could do was to extoll King's virtues as a stock dog, and declare his confidence in King's integrity. Under St. Bead's questioning he admitted that King had returned home on the morning after the sheep had been killed and that there was mud and brown stains on his coat.

After dismissing the witness Haines arose and took the leash from Bud's hands. Round-eyed and with lips parted, Bud came swiftly to his feet and for an instant it appeared that he was going to snatch the leash from Haines' hand and make a dash for liberty. Then he subsided with an audible sob.

Haines led the reluctant King out into the patch of light near the witness chair and bent low over him. The traces of brown were still visible on the white splotch under his throat, and there seemed to be a slight cut on his neck, but this abrasion was too far back to have caused the stains. These things Haines seemed to understand, and St. Bead offered no comment. The case

was made—it only remained for Haines to render his verdict.

"Where is his license tag, Pearson?" he demanded curiously.

"He—he lost it." This information came from Bud.

"When?"

"Night—afore last." The admission was almost a whisper.

For a tense, interminable minute Haines stood over the dog, and there was not one present who did not realize that he was formulating the words of his verdict. Also they knew what it would be. Bud, with a smothered sob, dropped on his knees and his arms went convulsively about King's neck, and Pearson turned and stared unseeingly toward the shelves behind the counter.

"Jest a minute, Haines!" St. Bead held up his hand with an arresting gesture. "Let's give him one last chance. It won't be much trouble to go up and take a look at them tracks. Not that I doubt Ranse's and 'Lige's word, but thar might be somethin' they overlooked. Besides, Josh, ye know that no sheep-killin' dog can walk up and look at sheep he has killed without his gaze fallin' and his tail droppin' betwixt his legs. Any man here will back me up in that." Half a dozen grunts and nods greeted his glance about the circle.

"That is also agreeable," announced Haines with alacrity, evidently anxious to postpone the unpleasant business of passing sentence as long as possible. "I am anxious to do all that is possible to arrive at a just verdict." Giving the leash into the boy's keeping, he adjourned his court and the crowd trooped outside, blinking in the sudden glare of the brilliant winter sunlight.

An hour later they were gathered at the upper end of the little swamp, some twenty yards distant from the mutilated victims of the depredation two nights previously. The swamp was filled with alder shrubs, and rank, dead grasses between the clumps of which glistened black slime and mud. Ranse's home lay a quarter of a mile away, but no sound had greeted the silent little party as they had passed it. The women and children must have feared trouble or their curiosity would have brought them outside.

High up overhead five great buzzards swung in wide circles, seemingly annoyed by the arrival of the investigators, and over on a knoll a few hundred yards to the right the remainder of Ranse's flock of sheep grazed peacefully. Bad 'Lige, noticing the buzzards, half shivered and muttered something under his breath.

Bud, manifestly afraid to put King to the final test of facing the crime of which he was accused, held back behind the knot of men and stared fixedly at nothing. After making an unhurried survey of the scene during which nothing seemed to escape his attention, Haines strode out toward the edge of the swamp.

"Bring your dog, son," he ordered softly.

Bud, with a start, straightened and compressing his lips tightly, made his way forward with hesitant trepidation. King, on the other hand, trotted to the fore and sniffed expectantly among the tangles of swamp grass. If he knew what lay just a few yards ahead of him, he gave absolutely no indication of it.

To a man the entire party crowded close behind Bud's heels, and not a word was spoken, so tense was the drama enacted before their eyes. There was not one among them who did not love dogs ,and the pawn that swung in the uncertain balance lay close to their hearts. In that tense moment they rounded a clump of alders and came upon the bodies of the sheep. Abruptly the party halted and watched the dog.

Bud's hand trembled as he clutched the leash spasmodically, and then his body grew tense and rigid. King paused for a space of at least five seconds, his

ears cocked and pointing forward and his tail wagging slowly. Then he advanced unhesitatingly and thrust his muzzle almost against the body of the nearest victim. His curiosity apparently satisfied, he turned and faced the crowd as if questioning what he should do next.

"Well, I'm darned!" The ejaculation evidently was surprised out of Ranse, for he was staring at the dog unbelievingly.

"That dog didn't do it," declared St. Bead with conviction. "I never saw a sheep killer that'd act like that. And neither have ye, Josh."

The justice of the peace so far forgot his official dignity as to scratch his head in bewilderment.

"He shows no signs of remorse," admitted Haines softly. "Perhaps he doesn't realize the enormity of his crime. Such a thing is possible."

"Mebbe so," grunted St. Bead. "Howsomever, if ye have him shot, I'm shore of one thing and that is that ye're executin' an innocent dog."

"But thar's his tracks," interrupted Ranse. "How're ye goin' to git around them?"

CHAPTER IV.

A REVERSED DECISION.

HAINES shook his head and passed one hand across his forehead uncertainly. His perplexity was mirrored in his every feature and it was plain that he was torn between two decisions.

"Le's take a look at them tracks," suggested St. Bead. "Mebbe it'll help us get at the truth."

Under Ranse's guidance they reached the lower end of the swamp and advanced several feet out into the soft mud beside the body of the last victim. Under a bank of drooping alders Ranse pointed an accusing finger, and Haines and St. Bead stooped and peered into the shadows.

In the partly dried mud a myriad of tracks was minutely imprinted, and the impressions, untouched by the action of the sun, were as plain as they had been on the night of the raid. In three of these tracks the middle toe was missing. There was not a vestige of a doubt that King had been there.

St. Bead felt some one crowd push past him and the next instant Bud was bending low over those tracks. For a barely perceptible instant he hung poised over them and then he straightened and whirled on Ranse.

"Whar at is Dammit?" he demanded in a shrill tone.

"Thar's the tracks," declared Ranse to Haines, ignoring the boy completely.

"Whar at is Dammit?" repeated Bud fiercely.

"Why, Bud!" feebly expostulated Haines.

"Whar at is Dammit?" Bud would not be denied.

Ranse shrugged impatiently. "I reckon he's up aroun' the house some-'ers," he replied.

"Ye lie," blazed Bud shrilly. "He'd 'a' barked at King as we come by if he'd been thar." He wheeled upon Haines and caught the long skirts of the justice's coat in a tense grip.

"'Twas Dammit killed them sheep," he cried almost incoherently. "Ye've got to believe that—ye've got to."

St. Bead caught the boy's shoulders in a firm grip. "Calm down, son," he soothed quietly. "Who is this Dammit ye're talkin' about?"

"It's his dog—a black-and-yaller-spotted hound." He pointed a trembling finger at Bad 'Lige. "He fetched it here when he come."

"Is that true?" demanded Haines of 'Lige.

"I had a dog named Dammit," he admitted, with a grin. "Called him that so's I'd have a good excuse for cussin' around the house when the womenfolks objected."

"How long's he been gone?" This from St. Bead.

"Since night afore last."

"Then it looks like he was mixed up in this business, too," observed St. Bead, with a shrug.

"He's the one as done the killin'," insisted Bud, hope dying slowly. "King couldn't 'a' done it. He jest couldn't."

"Can't see as how Dammit's bein' mixed up in this business is goin' to cl'ar King," Ranse observed in even tones. "Thar's the tracks. Ye can't deny 'em. Do yore duty, Haines."

For an instant indecision showed on the justice's face and then he squared his shoulders and drew a deep breath.

"You are right, Cantrell, I was on the point of permitting my sympathies overbalance my judgment. After due consideration of the evidence presented in this case, and by virtue of the authority invested in me as justice of the peace, I pronounce this dog guilty as charged, and sentence him to be shot. 'Lige Cantrell, I deputize you to——"

"Hold yore hosses a minute, Josh!" interrupted St. Bead. "If yore honor will permit, I'd like to hold up the business of this cou't long enough to talk a leetle while about—buzzards."

Haines eyes narrowed in anger and amazement, but he said nothing. The Cantrells, Pearson and the others stared at the old man as if he had gone bereft of his senses, but when they caught the drawling tone and twinkle of his eye, they knew that he was playing his favorite rôle—a dramatic, last-minute surprise. And so they waited, silent, expectant, and immobile.

"I've allus figgered that the buzzard was a plum', no-account scavenger, and I've sometimes wondered why they was put here. Not that I've ever questioned, but I've jest wondered why. Still it sort of looks like they might have their uses after all."

He was staring far out to the left in the direction of a pine-studded bluff approximately a quarter of a mile distant above which circled the five buzzards which had been frightened away from the swamp. In lowering swoops they whirled down over the treetops, coming ever closer to the ground, but not daring to alight.

"I've never heard," he continued thoughtfully, "of a buzzard bein' what ye could call an instrument of Providence, but 'He moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.' Mebbe the day of miracles is past, and mebbe He don't bother much about sech things as old King thar, I don't know about them things—and neither do any of ye. But thar is one thing about which I am certain and that is that them buzzards have told me in a way I can't doubt that the proof of King's innocence is up thar under them pine trees on that bluff." His wide, sweeping gesture came to halt with a finger pointing up toward the crest of the ridge above them.

A ripple of excitement stirred the crowd and something closely akin to awe seemed to settle over them. Pearson and another moved as if to start toward the bluff immediately, but St. Bead halted them with a word.

"I'd take it as a personal favor, Haines," he declared, after a slight pause, "if ye'll take yore cou't up thar with me. O' course I may be wrong, and if I am ye can go on with yore execution. But on the other hand if ye have him shot now and then we discover what I expect to find up thar, then ye'll regret it to the last day of yore life."

"Lead the way," ordered Haines shortly.

Upon the approach of the party the buzzards once more wheeled away in angry flight, and St. Bead stood watching them until they vanished in the distance. Upon entering the woods King took the lead, tugging at his leash and pulling his willing master at a pace which taxed the efforts of the experienced woodsmen. Under an overhanging cliff, deep within the pines, he halted and half covered in the dead leaves in

a tiny open glade lay the stiffened body of a black-and-yellow hound.

St. Bead with an enigmatical smile on his face strode forward and examined the find closely. Stooping, he picked up an object at which he stared curiously, and then he beckoned the others closer.

"Men," he said, unable to keep the elation he felt out of his voice, "here is what I expected to find—positive proof of King's innocence. Here"—pointing toward the glade—"is all that is left of the dog that killed Ranse's sheep, and the proof of what I say can be found in the wool ye can see betwixt his teeth. Ye can't doubt that." He paused an instant to let this truth sink in.

"King knew exactly whar to find Dammit," he continued. "Ye saw him lead us right to this spot. He chased Dammit up here when he caught him killin' them sheep, and they fought it out to the death. Ye can see that the ground is torn up considerably. King finally killed him. That's how he got that stain on his coat. If ye require any more proof, here is the collar with King's license tag on it. Ye saw me pick it up thar a minute ago."

He held out the circlet of leather in his hand, and slowly glanced over the crowd. What he saw brought a smile of contentment to his rugged features.

"Does any man here doubt this proof?" he demanded.

They were silent.

"How about ye, Haines. Are ye plum' satisfied?"

"I am." He fumbled in his inside pocket for an instant, produced the warrant and slowly tore it into shreds. In three strides he reached Bud's side and dropped one arm about his shoulders.

"He's yore dog, son," he said softly. "Take him. Bead, give him the collar."

Bud caught the torn bit of leather and then glanced up into Haines' face, his eyes filling with tears of joy and relief. He gulped audibly, tried to speak, and his lips trembled. He wheeled, choking back the sobs, and stiffening his shoulders to hide the emotion that shook him, he trudged swiftly out through the woods in the direction of his home with King running joyously ten paces in front.

INDIAN RELICS

MUCH time has been given and many books and articles have been written concerning the Indian civilizations in the Western section of the United States and Mexico. Organized research, in the form of archæological expeditions, have turned up lots of earth, pottery and relics of the past.

However, there have not been a great many accounts about discoveries made in the Eastern and Southeastern sections of the United States. No doubt these Indians did not leave as many lasting relics as did their brothers to the West.

One account, though, tells of the discovery in Georgia of the site of an ancient village. Apparently, these people were of an Indian civilization more advanced than any others so far located in the East.

The pottery and textiles uncovered show that they were unusually skilled workers. Cosmetics along the line used by the modern girl were also found, as well as ornaments, weapons, and tools.

Those excavating the site claim that these people were great traders. They found there materials such as do not exist in Georgia—flint from southern Tennessee and Arkansas, shell from Florida, mica from North Carolina, galena from Illinois and iron ore from Missouri.

Winged Gold

By George E. Powers

Part I



CHAPTER I.

A PRIVATE WAR.

WITH admiring eyes Phil Waring sat and watched the girl come tripping up the aisle and slide into the chair just ahead of him. His eyes continued to follow her even as she sat down. Only her tight-fitting little hat showed above the back of the chair.

"Pretty, isn't she?" The words caused him to glance sharply at the man beside him.

"Yes, very," he answered. "It about took my breath away to see a girl like that in a tank town out here in the desert."

"She lives here," the stranger said. "That is, in Mecca, the next stop."

"Mecca!" Waring cried, surprised. "Why, that's where I'm going. I'm out here from Denver to shoot some trouble on a flotation mill my company sold some time ago."

"Indio Mine, eh?"

"Yes; a man by the name of Amos Alden. Do you know him?"

"That's his daughter, Patricia, ahead of us."

"You don't say! Well, no wonder he's complaining about the mill not producing fast enough to suit him—with a girl like that to provide for."

"Oh, she spends plenty all right, with her trips to Los Angeles. The crowds she brings back here to entertain, and what not. It don't put a dent in the pile her father's crooked work has built up for him," the man said, a trifle bitterly.

"You don't seem to have much love for him?" Waring remarked, not overly impressed, yet curious enough to let the other continue on.

"I haven't—not many around these parts have, either. I doubt if there are fifty people in the whole county on friendly terms with him. I don't suppose you ever heard how he got his start when he came out here flat broke, about twenty years ago?"

Waring shook his head. "First time I was ever here."

"That's right; I forgot. Naturally you wouldn't know. Well, he stole the richest mine he's got, the Casa Madera, from old Miguel Rico, the greaser that discovered it. But it's a long story and I won't bother to tell it. It's just that kind of business he's been up to ever since, though.

"Why, right now Alden is getting ready to grab a mine that's liable to turn out richer than the Casa Madera. Here, read that!" He pulled a newspaper out of his pocket and spread it across Waring's knees.

"Mecca *Democrat,*" he explained, indicating a short paragraph with his finger. "That's what I mean. Read the item about 'Moja' Flint."

MOJA FLINT BACK IN JAIL

Moja Flint is back in the county jail to serve out a thirty-day sentence for trespassing on other people's property, out near Indian Wells. This makes the fourth sentence Judge Craig has meted out to him in the past five months for trespassing on this same property.

Waring's face wore a rather puzzled expression when he finished the article and handed the paper back.

"That didn't tell you anything, Mr. —— Here I've been rattling along and I don't even know your name—Waring, you say? Mine's Holloway. I run the Desert Garage in Mecca.

"But, as I was saying, what you just read there doesn't mean a thing unless you know what lies behind it. Amos owns the *Democrat,* lock, stock, and barrel, and he's careful what goes in for news. I'll tell you about the whole thing."

With growing interest Waring listened while Holloway unfolded a harrowing tale. It was how one man, rich, powerful, in the prime of life, had set out to strip another, a man aged, decrepit, and without friends. The one with riches desired the wealth that had come to the other in the twilight of his life.

For nearly forty years, Moja Flint had prospected the length and breadth of the desert country in the never waning hope of making the "big strike."

One day he stumbled upon it quite by accident. Free gold was in the coarse gravel of an ancient river bed that lay concealed under a shallow covering of desert sand.

His good luck was short-lived. Within the fortnight, Amos Alden acquired from the railroad company a thousand acres of land entirely surrounding the half-section Flint had purchased with the proceeds of his first week of secret mining.

This compelled Flint to pass over Alden's holdings to reach his own. He soon found himself arrested and brought into justice court. Adjudged guilty of trespass, a thirty-day jail sentence stared him in the face.

With the obstinateness of a child, he ventured again on the forbidden land at the expiration of his sentence. Another period in jail was the result. Five days after completing the second commitment, he started his third.

Thinking to outwit Alden, Moja had taken to visiting his land long after midnight, working quietly till dawn, then slipping away. After three or four nights a vigilant guard apprehended him.

The third sentence he served stoically. Furthermore, he spurned, as he had done twice before, a suspension of sentence in the event he accept Alden's offer to buy his land at a price little above the amount he had paid. Freed a third time, his persistence soon had landed him in jail once more.

"I suppose Alden just figures on wearing the old fellow down until he gets discouraged and sells out for a song," Waring said, when Holloway had finished the story.

"That's it exactly," Holloway replied. "The poor old fellow hasn't got a chance. According to law, Amos is in the clear. The only thing against him is public sentiment. He doesn't care a snap of his finger for that. Any time now I look for Moja Flint to give up the ship. Then watch Amos shoot in a crew and begin to rake out the gold."

The slowing down of the train, just then, for the stop at Mecca brought the conversation to a close. By the time they had their baggage together, and filed out onto the station platform, unfortunate old Moja Flint seemed to have passed entirely from the mind of either.

Holloway departed, after a hasty handclasp, and singing out an invitation for Waring to stop in at the garage and see him next day.

Waring looked about him for some means of transportation to town. He was just in time to see a slender, blond youth escorting the girl to a large, bright-colored roadster. A moment later it started up and vanished down the wide dirt street in a cloud of dust.

The driver of the rickety old hotel bus took Waring's bags. Five minutes later Waring was being ushered into the lobby of the Mecca Inn.

His first act on being shown to his room was to put in a telephone call for Amos Alden at the mines.

After many minutes, he finally got his connection. A gruff "Hello!" sounded over the wire. After Waring mentioned his name and explained he had come to remedy the trouble with the mine mill, the surly response his words brought made him furious.

"Western Mill Supply, eh?" said Alden. "About time you showed up—lost a week already fooling around with your junky outfit. Send somebody there to pick you up? Say! Who do you think you are? Hire a car to bring you out here."

Click! Alden had hung up the receiver too quickly to give Waring a chance to hurl back the sharp retort on his lips.

Waring's first impulse was to not go near the mine at all, but take the next train back to Denver. On second thought, however, it occurred to him there might be some deep-lying motive in Alden's insulting way of speaking. Possibly Alden intended him to take the very step he had in mind, creating an excuse to reject the mill on the grounds of lack of service.

"No!" he cried angrily. "I'll go out there and adjust the darn mill if there's no other way to get out but walk.

He quickly changed the clothes he had on, for a well-worn tweed suit, old shoes, and old hat, then went downstairs to follow Alden's suggestion about a car.

His thoughts naturally turned first to Holloway, but not wanting to appear presumptive on such short acquaintance he determined to try other sources first. Finally he found a youth willing to drive the fifteen miles to the mines and wait there an hour or two.

Waring stepped into the general office on arriving at the mines, and asked for Alden.

"He isn't in," the girl at the information desk said. "What was it you wanted?"

Briefly he explained his mission, remarking Alden's presence wasn't absolutely necessary and that in his absence he would inspect the mill.

"Oh, you couldn't do that!" the girl objected. "Nobody's allowed to go in the mill without an order from Mr. Alden or the superintendent, and neither are here this afternoon."

"Who is next in charge?" he said sharply. His anger was beginning to flare up again at this obviously deliberate action to hinder his work.

Before she could answer, the entrance door swung open. Patricia Alden came toward the desk.

"Pardon me, Miss Alden," Waring said suddenly, taking a step toward her. "Since your father is not here, perhaps you might grant me permission to inspect the mill."

Two lively blue eyes peered up at him questioningly. He made the most of the period of silence that followed her questioning glance. It gave him a chance to view at close range this girl whose beauty had so impressed him from a greater distance that morning.

He saw the small, slightly tilted nose; the perfect ears, each swept by a whirl of curly, bobbed brown hair. The red lips were slightly pouting. The slim

figure, he noticed; and the tiny foot which tapped the floor in mild annoyance.

"Really—you are delightfully indefinite." Her tone was just a trifle cold. The frown on her face was an implied rebuke for his abrupt address and bold manner of staring at her.

"I'm sorry," he spoke up quickly. "I had no thought to be rude. My name is Waring—from the Western Mill Supply, Denver. I made a flying trip out her to check over some trouble you're having with one of our mill installations.

"I was naturally disappointed on arriving here to find your father had gone away, despite the fact I phoned him about an hour ago. It seems that without his permission I will not be able to go into the mill and make an inspection.

"That is why, when you suddenly came in, I asked if you might help me out. I assure you anything you can do to speed up matters will be appreciated."

As he talked, a single upward tilt of her eyes appraised him as thoroughly as had his prolonged stare at her, yet he was not aware she had given him more than a casual glance.

He was young, and in height his body was well proportioned. His tanned face, though fairly regular of features. but for the saving grace of a pair of humorous gray eyes would have deserved the simple description "homely."

"I'm sure it was an urgent call," she said quietly, "or dad wouldn't have left so suddenly. I suppose I *could* go down to the mill and have the foreman let you in.'"

"I surely would appreciate it," he reiterated. "Shall we go now?" He strode to the door and held it open for her.

She said nothing during the short walk to the big mill. He made no effort to get her to talk. When they reached the large building, he expressed his gratitude for her interceding with the mill foreman to let him go inside.

During the next hour Waring's only interest was the machinery and apparatus of the combined fifty-stamp mill and flotation auxiliary. From the ponderous stamps, where the gold ore was reduced to a powdered mass, on down through the numerous processes of treatment he searched for trouble.

Upon emerging from the mill Waring made no comment to the foreman. There was, however, a satisfied little smile playing about the corners of his mouth as he tramped back into the mine offices.

Neither Alden nor the superintendent was back yet. Leaving word he would phone the mine owner and tell him the result of the inspection later that evening, Waring started back to Mecca.

"Mr. Alden," Waring said, late that night when he succeeded in getting a call through, "the fault you attribute to the flotation equipment does not lie there at all. Your stamp-mill delivery has been causing all the trouble. For one thing, you are stamping too dry.

"Summing up the whole thing, it looks like your mill foreman doesn't know his business, or else he's letting the mill drift along in a slipshod fashion. It's too bad I had to come all the way out here from Denver to uncover a piece of negligence that you could easily have avoided weeks ago."

"That's just about what I expected," came Alden's sneering reply. "Your crooked outfit pans off a bum lot of equipment and then hasn't got grit enough to stand behind it when it goes on the bum. You're all a bunch of crooked buckpassers!"

"You should talk about anybody being crooked!" Waring flared back wrathfully. "You've stolen everything you could get your hands on the past twenty years. Right now you're putting the boots to a poor, broken-down old

man so you can steal his mine. You call anybody else crooked!"

Alden's words came back over the wire with the rumble of a lion's roar: "You wouldn't say that to my face!"

"Why wouldn't I?" Waring asked defiantly.

"Because I'd knock your head off, that's why!"

"Well, listen to this, you big braggart: I'll just call that bluff! I intended to take the night train out, but I won't now. I'll stick around here to-morrow, and the next day, if I have to.

"I'll give you all the chance you want to knock my head off. Come into town and hunt me up and see whether I'll call you a crook to your face!"

"Why, you—I'll——" Waring waited to hear no more. Viciously he jammed the receiver onto its hook, and walked over and began to unpack the suit case he had packed only an hour before.

CHAPTER II.

A MILLION IN SIGHT.

THOUGH by morning the anger of the night before had dwindled to a mere smoldering, Waring felt no regret for the challenge he had flung in Alden's face. After breakfast, he settled down in the lobby, curious to see whether Alden would put in his appearance.

Two hours dragged by without sign of him. Waring began to doubt if anything would come of the affair. There yet remained two hours before train time, however, and he decided to wait a while longer.

Hearing the street door creak a few minutes later, he looked up from his magazine. With a start, he recognized the girl of the train. At her side towered a veritable giant of a man. Amos Alden had been described as a big man, but this enormous figure amazed Waring.

Alden was not over fifty, despite a tawny head of gray hair that made him look older. One glimpse of his deep-lined, hard face left no wonder in Waring's mind as to why he was the dominant figure, physically, financially, and politically, in Indio County.

Along with his six and a half feet of brawn, Alden carried an air of confidence, determination. Waring realized he encountered an antagonist not to be taken lightly. To accomplish his end, this man would stop before no impediment that strength or money had an even chance to sweep aside.

Waring watched them walk up to the desk and address the clerk, who turned and pointed in his direction. Both followed the motion. Waring knew by the change in her expression that the girl recognized him. To sit still and pretend ignorance of their presence would cast a reflection upon his courage. Waring got up and walked toward them.

"Good morning," he said, when he got within a few feet of them.

His words were directed to the girl, though his eyes watched Alden narrowly. The moment of silence was fast becoming awkward, but he waited for the next move to come from Alden. It came after the big man had stared to his satisfaction.

"So you're the smart Aleck I was talking to, are you?" he burst out. "Well, let me tell you something, young man, you——"

"Mr. Alden," Waring interrupted him sharply, his anger beginning to mount again, "I purposely delayed going back to Denver. I have waited around here all morning for you to put in your appearance, so I could demonstrate to you I was not afraid to repeat to your face what I said last night over the phone. You can save what you have to tell me till I say what I have in mind.

"What I said last night still goes! You're not only a big, bullying liar and a four-flusher, but a crook. You are of the caliber that would loot a blind

man's cup or rob an old man that couldn't raise a hand to help himself!" With that, he turned his back contemptuously and started for the stairway.

Like a flash, one of Alden's big paws shot out and spun Waring back around.

"You can't get away with that kind of talk!" he shouted.

Waring jerked his arm free viciously and stepped back. "Oh, yes, I will. Because I won't take your bluff for anything except what it is—bluff! When you made your big threat about knocking my head off, you thought I wouldn't be here to-day to repeat my words. Or, if by any chance I was, you could scare me out with your half-a-ton of beef.

"But it doesn't work, my friend," Waring went on. "The country's full of big oxen like you that get by without showing what's inside. You might take a poke at the poor old fellow cooped up, by your orders, in the county jail—but not at me or anybody else willing to take a chance against you."

Alden studied Waring's scant six feet of well-built body for an instant in silence. "Why, you young whelp, I could break you in two! Just like that!" He emphasized his utterance with a gesture of his big hands, but made no move to execute the threat.

"Well, you'll never have a better chance," Waring returned. He then added, as he looked the girl squarely in the face! "But you won't take advantage of it—even if you did bring your daughter along so you could show off in front of her!"

Those last few words brought Patricia Alden forward, eyes flashing angrily, her little fists clenched menacingly. "Don't let him talk to you like that, dad!" she cried.

Then she turned upon Waring. "You—you—you——" she faltered, her quivering lips unable to form the words she wanted so badly to hurl at him. "Oh, I hate you! I despise you!"

Waring was sorely tempted to laugh. Instead, he said to her gravely: "That's real nice of you—and on such short acquaintance, too!"

He whirled and ran up the stairs, leaving them in the center of an amused crowd, attracted mainly by Alden's loud voice.

When Waring hurried up to his room, the main thought in his mind was to get ready to make the train. Five minutes afterward, he stopped abruptly in the midst of packing a suit case, put on his hat and went back downstairs, bound for Holloway's garage.

He found Holloway seated in the office. Drawing up a chair, Waring plunged bluntly into the business that brought him there.

"I just had a run-in with your friend Alden," he began, by way of introduction. He continued by relating in detail his experiences since the previous afternoon.

"You must have had Amos hypnotized to get by with what you called him without having a battle," Holloway remarked. "When he comes to, look out! You'll be out of here by then, though. You're pulling out to-night, aren't you?"

"That's what I'm not sure about," Waring answered quietly. "You know, that little fracas with Alden kind of gave me a wild idea of a way to help that old fellow you told me about on the train. At the same time I might make a little money. That is, if his mine really amounts to something."

"Don't worry about the mine. If it wasn't worth plenty, Amos wouldn't be out to grab it. What's up your sleeve, anyway?"

Waring told him the scheme that had cropped up so suddenly in his mind. "It's only tentative," he explained, when he finished. "The topography of the old man's land may be such as to make it impractical. That's why I wanted to lay the whole thing before you and get your opinion as to its feasibility."

"Boy, it's a knock-out!" Holloway cried, pounding the desk with his fist excitedly. "Old Moja'll grab onto it like a drowning man goes after a straw, and split three ways on it, too. If he don't, he's crazy. Or did you figure to count me in on it?"

"I did, yes," Waring returned. After hesitating slightly he added: "It will take some money to put it over, and I'm not weighted down with the stuff."

"That's all right! I'll gamble some dough if there's half a chance to knock the props out from under Amos and at the same time put the old man right side up. But it's got to be a sort of a silent-partner idea on my part.

"Amos has a lease on this building, you see. If he got wise I was bucking him, he'd raise the rent so high a millionaire couldn't pay it. Then I'd be out in the street. I'll tell you what you do; go down to the jail and see Moja and tell him I sent you and that I'm for it strong.

"You may have to put up a stiff front to get in. Amos runs the sheriff here and he's probably left orders to keep the old man from talking to people. If you can't talk your way in on some pretext or other, come on back and I'll figure out some way to get you through."

On entering the jail five minutes later Waring could hardly conceal his surprise at the cordial manner of the jailer when he requested to see Moja Flint.

"Amos phoned last night there'd be somebody here this morning," the jailer said. "I been expecting you, Mr.—Mr.—— Amos mentioned your name, but I didn't get it very clear."

"Why—Waring," he replied falteringly. The fact just dawned on him that he was mistaken for some one Alden was sending to the jail to see the old man.

"Well, come on out here and I'll bring the old rat out."

Waring followed him into a huge, bare room that contained only a wobbly pine table and two battered stools. He perched himself on one of these and waited.

Presently the jailer returned, tagging along behind him a little, dried-up old man, scarcely five and a half feet tall.

He was a pathetic figure, indeed. His blue overalls were faded. He wore a ragged black shirt and a soiled gray derby hat tilted far back on his shaggy gray head. Cheap, steel-rimmed spectacles were thrust up on to his forehead.

"This is the gent Amos sent over to talk to you," the jailer explained, then left them alone.

The old man slid the glasses down onto his nose and stood for a moment blinking at Waring. "Well, I s'pose you come fer me to sign the papers," Moja Flint said at length.

"I'm not Alden's man," Waring said in a low voice. "I've come here on my own accord to have a talk with you. The jailer mistook me for somebody Alden is sending. I don't want to be here when he comes, so let me tell you what I have in mind just as quickly as possible.

"You mentioned something about papers. Don't sign a thing Alden wants you to. Dave Holloway and I are in a position to help you beat Alden, and we are going to do it. I can't take time to go into details now, but here's the whole thing in a nutshell. We're willing to go in with you on a three-way proposition, and work the mine. We'll do it in such a way Alden will be helpless to interfere. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Sure!" Flint cried eagerly. "They's more gold there'n all of us kin ever spend. If you kin keep Amos f'm buttin' in, they's a millium dollars 'n sight. I ain't dreamin'! Amos knows it's so an' wants to take it away f'm me!"

Waring assured Flint everything would be arranged to start work as soon

as his sentence expired. Pledging him to absolute silence until that time, Waring hurried outside and back to the garage.

Holloway was elated when informed of Moja's readiness to accept the proposition. "Boy!" he cried. "That stunt sure is a hummer! The more I think about it, the better it looks. What's the program now, anyway? Anything we can do till Moja gets out?"

"No, I don't think there is. I'll go back to Denver to-night and fix things up so I can get away for a while. Too, if I stick around here for three weeks with no apparent reason for it, Alden's liable to put two and two together and figure there's something in the air.

"Unless I hear from you not to come, I'll be back the day before Flint gets out of jail. Well, I've still got about half an hour to make the train—till I get back, then!" With a friendly handclasp and a smile, Waring left.

CHAPTER III.

WINGS FOR THE GOLD.

THE night before Moja Flint's last day in jail, Waring stepped off the train. He handed his bags over to the bus driver, then proceeded to the garage.

"Didn't you get my letter?" Holloway addressed him reproachfully, as he entered the office.

"I got it, yes," Waring replied, "but you didn't think that was going to stop me coming, did you?"

Holloway let his eyes drop for a moment while he scuffed the floor uneasily with his foot, but said nothing.

"What made you change your mind and back out so suddenly?" Waring went on.

"Well, to tell the truth, I just let myself run plumb wild when you put the idea up to me. After I got to thinking it over, I decided I can't afford to take a chance on mixing up in it."

"I don't know whether I can afford to take a chance, but I am, anyway," Waring said. "It's a sure thing I don't intend to go so far as to get the old man all worked up and expecting help, then turn him down cold.

"But don't worry about it! Let the matter drop as far as you're concerned. I only came in to let you know your backing out is all right with me. I can carry on all right alone."

"I'm sorry——" Holloway began, but at that juncture a customer drove in. He hurried out of the office,

Without bothering to wait, Waring walked outside and on up to the hotel.

Next morning he divided his time between his room and the hotel lobby, growing more impatient as each passing moment after ten oclock failed to bring Flint. The understanding was for the old man to come to Waring's room as soon as he was released.

About eleven, however, a light rap came on the door. At his call Flint ventured in timidly.

"I kind o' half-figured you wouldn't be here," he said, sitting down. "Amos might o' hopped onto you when he found out you was to see me, an' right away I up an' turns his offer down."

Waring laughed. "If there's going to be any hopping going on, old-timer, we'll be the ones to do it."

"I dunno," Flint said dubiously. "Amos runs things aroun' here jist like he pleases. You dunno Amos like I do."

"Say, you're a regular old kill-joy!" Waring cried, slapping him carefully across his narrow shoulders. "In less than a week we'll be showing Alden a thing or two—even if Holloway has got cold feet and left us to fight it out alone."

"Dave backed out?" Moja said, alarmed.

"Yes; but we don't care. For some reason or other, Holloway was afraid to have it known he was lined up with us. Anyway, he only planned to help

out financially. Now he's decided he won't go that far even. So let's forget him entirely and settle down to business.

"First of all, I want to have a look at this land you went to sleep on and let Alden tie you up on all sides. Is it marked in any way so you can tell when you're on his land or yours?"

"Fenced; one-stran' barbed wire," Flint replied laconically. Then, as the import of Waring's words sifted into his mind, he added. "But I ain't takin' no chances cuttin' acrost his diggin's.

"Tell me how to get there. I'll go myself."

Moja thought diligently for a moment. "No!" he cried suddenly. "I'll go 'long with you. Maybe it'll end up 'n a stretch 'n the calaboose, but nobody never said ol' Moja Flint ain't game!"

That night after ten o'clock Waring left the hotel and strolled leisurely down Main Street till he came to the edge of the desert. Moja was waiting.

The old man carried a short-handled shovel. Waring thought little of this until, after a walk of nearly an hour, they ran into a high, barbed-wire fence devised with long, overhanging crosspieces to frustrate any attempt at climbing over.

"I was out here after I left you 'safternoon an' seen this," Moja explained. "Amos rigged it up since I bin in jail this trip." He set to work scooping out a trench under the bottom strand of wire.

In five minutes they were on the other side, walking again. Another five minutes brought them to Moja's rude fence.

"My land!" the old man chuckled, indicating his hemmed-in holdings with a sweep of his hand. "But no way to git in or out."

Ducking under the sagging wire, Flint led the way to a shallow coulee. Looking down, Waring could just make out in the faint moonlight the opening of a narrow shaft in the bottom, and a short distance away a small lean-to.

"It's right down there!" Moja cried bitterly. "Gold by the handful! And no way to git it out!"

"Don't be so pessimistic," Waring laughed. "Of course there's a way. That's just the reason we're out here looking around, so we'll know how to go about it."

He walked away from the sunken area and turned his attention to the level portion beyond. The land, he noticed, differed materially from the desert land adjacent to Mecca.

It was fairly flat, save for an occasional hummock, and the sagebrush and cacti clumps were fewer and farther apart. He walked around, stamping every few feet.

"Firm enough to hold up an automobile without miring down in the sand," he said, more to himself than to Moja, but the old man heard.

"Sure!" he flared up. "An' they's gold 'nough here to buy a hunderd of 'em. But you can't go across Amos' land with a automobile, 'thout gittin' hauled up, any more'n you has a chanct to walk."

"I wasn't thinking of automobiles," Waring said. Suddenly he switched the subject. "I've seen all I want to. Let's get out of here while the getting is good. I'm getting the morning train out to Los Angeles."

"Yer what?" Moja exploded.

Waring nodded. "Oh, don't be afraid I'm running out on you, too. I'll be back to-morrow night unless I have to run on down to San Diego. At any rate, I won't be gone more than three or four days. But when I do come back, we'll be loaded for Alden proper. We'll be in position to laugh at him.

"Here's one thing, however, that I want to impress on you. Don't hang around Mecca while I'm gone. Duck out of sight somewhere and stay there till I come back. Now that you're out of jail, Alden will be looking around for some excuse to throw you back in."

Moja grinned. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll go on down to Indio to-night an' hole up there till you git back. Jist leave word at the Palm pool room when you want me an' I'll come a-jumpin'."

They trudged along through the sand for some minutes in silence, and had come within sight of Alden's high fence when Moja spoke up.

"Say, young feller, I jist stopped to think—you ain't tol' me yit how yer figurin' to—I dunno what yer up to."

"It's a kind of a secret yet," Waring said, laughing, "but I'll tell you the whole thing when I come back."

"Well, I ain't perticlder, 'cept I'd kind o' like to know. I guess it must be perty good or you wouldn't be wastin' all this time on it."

"It's good, all right, old-timer. You wait and see!"

At noon next day Waring was shaking hands with the owner of a garage in Los Angeles. "I heard, Mr. Crawford, that you have planes for sale."

Crawford nodded, eying his questioner speculatively. "Want one?"

"Yes—cheap for cash."

"Jenny?"

"Have to be for what I can afford to pay. How much?"

"From seven hundred and fifty dollars up."

Waring's face took on a thoughtful look.

Crawford was quick to discern it. "I've got a used Springfield," he hastened to say, "that you can have for four hundred and fifty dollars. The linen's pretty well shot and one or two valves blow a little, but she'll fly for a month or two without a recover job or overhauling the motor."

Waring studied the proposition over in his mind for a moment. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "I've got just four hundred dollars in cash to spare. If you want to let it go at that, I'll hop it away this afternoon."

"She's yours!" Crawford said without hesitating. "Let's see the money, and I'll go down with you and pull 'er out of the hangar."

It was after four o'clock in the afternoon before Waring, flying the rear cockpit of the somewhat dilapidated training plane, shoved the throttle ahead, shoved the control stick clear ahead and ran down to the airport field at Santa Monica.

Despite the hundreds of hours chalked up against the motor, it "revved" nearly one thousand and four hundred on the test blocks. This was far beyond Waring's expectations.

With a gentle head wind to aid in the take-off, the ship cleared the ground after a run of little more than a hundred yards.

He circled the field twice to gain altitude, then swung off toward the distant San Bernardino Range.

"If you can't make seven thousand feet in the next hour, old Jenny," he shouted to himself, "we'll never make Mecca to-night—or any night, I'm afraid!"

And though the altimeter registered but a few feet over six thousand when the base of the mountains was reached. that altitude proved ample to top the highest peak.

Once over the summit and sweeping along more than a mile above the foothills, Waring breathed freer. Should a forced landing come now he had plenty altitude to enable the selection of a landing field within a radius of three or four miles.

No forced landing occurred, however; nor did the throbbing old eight-cylinder motor so much as skip fire once in the hour or more it required to bring Mecca in sight. He still had better than five thousand feet when directly above the few white-and-brown blotches that represented houses and buildings of the desert town.

Temptation to put the ship, aged

though she was, "through the paces" was too strong to resist.

Before taking off at Santa Monica he had given her a minute inspection. Everything seemed in perfect condition, and that she was rigged beyond fault the flying performance proved.

One or two spins wouldn't do any harm, he reasoned, so no sooner was the thought in mind than his hands and feet began to work.

Closing the throttle he pulled the nose up just a trifle and waited for flying speed to diminish. Then when the nose began to drop, he crossed control stick and rudder. One wing dropped lower and lower, the nose increased its downward angle, and the spin was on.

Four complete spins—a thousand feet altitude gone. Still he held the controls crossed.

Five more spins, then he reversed the controls from their former position, held them there for an instant, and finally brought rudder and stick into neutral position, to come out right-side up half a mile closer to the town.

Glancing down, as he held the ship in a vertical bank directly over Main Street, he could see the ground dotted with the hundreds of people, lured outside by the irresistible drone of the motor.

Having spun nine consecutive times without any indication of ill effects from the strain, he thought the ship would stand a loop or two, and an Immelmann turn as well. So he drove straight down, throttle wide open, in order to attain the required speed the low-powered motor alone could not give.

Then he pulled back on the stick until she emerged from a zoom and hung for an instant on her back, to fall on over as he cut the throttle and completed a graceful loop. One more loop and two Immelmann turns brought him to an even thousand feet above the ground.

By now the fever of the air burned within him. He yielded to another rush of temptation to give his fast-swelling audience a last thrill at closer range. Idling the motor, he banked quickly, and kicked the opposite rudder. Holding the stick just far enough back to force the nose a trifle upward, the ship, in an instant, was side-slipping straight down upon the portion of the crowd packed in the center of the street.

The field he wanted to land in lay right at the edge of town. He held in the slip till a mere hundred feet separated him from the scattering spectators.

Then he leveled the ship out quickly and stalled down into the field, rolling hardly more than a hundred feet in the unpacked sand.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE SKY.

IN the excited crowd that swarmed around the plane when Waring taxied up to the street fence and stopped, was Patricia Alden. As he vaulted out of the cockpit and straightened up on hitting the ground, he came face to face with her.

He appeared not to recognize her, but a flush of angry color that crept into her face showed she knew him.

She was piqued to the point of tears that the daring pilot, whose thrilling stunts had brought her dashing to the field to be in at the landing, should turn out to be the despised stranger that had flung defiance in her father's face.

To trample further upon her ruffled pride and vanity, Waring, at first inclined to preserve his affected failure to recognize her, changed his mind.

As he brushed by her, he smiled and said: "Well, if it isn't the pretty little girl that hates me so cordially!"

Before she had a chance to say a word he was swallowed up in the crowd.

All she could do was stand and gaze after him, half-angered, half-amused at his bantering words.

Waring shook off the horde of clamoring children that trailed after him when he left the field. He hurried on to the hotel, to phone word for Moja to come to Mecca immediately.

The old man put in his appearance soon after dark. Waring lost little time in laying before him the plan to outwit Alden.

At first Moja was elated, but after a moment's thought grew very serious. "You ain't 'spectin' me to ride 'n that crazy airship?" he asked.

"Nothing else but, old-timer!"

"Well, I ain't gonna do it! I'm perfectly satisfied down here," he said vehemently. No amount of coaxing or explanation of the safety of an airplane could allay his fears.

"See here!" Waring said sharply, finally despairing of winning him over by reason. "After I've gone this far trying to help you out, you're not going to spoil everything by acting up like a two-year-old.

"You're going to climb into the ship in the morning or else I'll tie you up with a piece of rope and take you along that way. So you might just as well make up your mind to go!"

Even this ultimatum failed to swerve old Flint. He stubbornly declared that if the only way to get to the mine was in an airplane, he'd stay on the ground and continue to starve.

Nor by breakfast time had he changed his mind. He did weaken to the extent that he'd go down to the field and see what the "danged contrapshun" looked like.

As Waring had hoped, few people were loitering around so early in the morning. By the time the ship had been oiled and gassed and the motor started, not more than twenty were on hand to witness the take-off.

While the motor was warming up, Moja had wandered off a few feet and was entertaining a small, interested audience. "Yes, sir!" Waring heard him say, as he walked up behind him. "Me'n him's too smart fer Amos. We'll be over thar'n a jiffy, 'thout havin' to set a boot on Amos' ground!"

"Well, come on then, let's go," Waring cut in. "The motor is warmed up. We're wasting time staying here."

Before Moja had time to let out a wail of protest, he felt himself lifted bodily and dumped into the rear cockpit. Too dumfounded to struggle, he sat perfectly still while the safety belt was buckled. When warned to keep his feet clear of the rudder and his hands off the ignition switch and throttle, he only nodded weakly.

Then Waring climbed in front, spun the tail around with a blast or two of the propeller, and they were off. Frantically Moja realized the plane was bounding along over the uneven ground.

Then the bumping ceased altogether. Looking over the side to find out what the trouble was, he saw the ground begin to fall away, faster and faster.

It gave Flint a sickening sensation to watch it. He pulled his head back inside and closed his eyes. Curiosity got the better of him after a moment or two, though, and he ventured another look over the side.

Waring glanced around and smiled. Moja grinned back at him and immediately settled down in his chair and proceeded to enjoy himself thoroughly.

"Bet Amos'll throw a couple o' fits when he hears 'bout this!" he shouted at Waring. When it finally dawned on him, after repeating the words several times, that he couldn't make himself heard above the roar of the motor, he settled down comfortably in the seat, waiting eagerly for what was to come next.

Contrary to Moja's wager with himself, Alden didn't throw two, or even one, fit when apprised of the boast the old man had made to the crowd gathered around him.

Alden was seated at the breakfast table with his daughter when the news was conveyed to him by Alfred Eames. It was Eames Waring saw drive off in the bright-colored roadster the day he first came to Mecca.

Alden's eyes narrowed and his lips compressed tightly. Pale blotches of angry color seeped through the tan of his face. But he conjured up a derisive smile that seemed to belie even these meager signs of the fury that surged within him.

"If Patricia isn't mistaken about that fellow that got out of the plane being the same one who came here to look the mill over," Eames went on to say, "then it's clear as day why he went to see old Flint in the jail."

"I'm *not* mistaken!" the girl said firmly. "I wasn't more than six feet away when he climbed out of the plane. I even recognized the same old tweed suit and cap he wore the day he came here."

"Well, suppose it is?" Alden scoffed. "What can he do? A fine combination! Him and old Moja and a broken-down flying machine. Let 'em buzz around a while and break their fool necks!"

"They can do the very thing you've spent a lot of time and plenty of money trying to keep Flint alone from doing the past six months," Patricia spoke up. "And don't be too sure about that being a broken-down old plane, either, or that he's liable to break their necks. If you'd seen the way he stunted up over town, you'd change your mind about that!"

"What are you doing, sticking up for him?" Eames shot the question at her suspiciously.

"Oh, don't be foolish—of course not!" she protested hastily, but his accusation brought a rush of color to her face.

"Certainly not!" she added with a show of indignation. "But I know real flying when I see it. I know no broken-down old plane could possibly stand up under the things he made it do.

"I—I—well, I just didn't want you to underestimate him and give him a chance to put anything over before you realized it," she finished rather lamely.

Eames sat and scowled at her, but her father was too immured in his own thoughts to observe her confusion.

"Well," Alden spoke up suddenly, "I'll sure put a spoke in their little game before the day's over. Moja's bragging around how smart he is, eh? I'll take both of 'em down a peg or two!"

"How, dad?" Patricia asked, interested.

"I'll buy that clearing at the end of Main Street and jail 'em both for trespass when they land this afternoon."

"Say!" Eames came out of his fit of sulking long enough to indorse the idea. "Why don't you do that?"

"I'm going to," Alden announced grimly. "We'll go to town right now. Never mind breakfast; you can eat later." He shoved his chair back from the table and left the room.

Eames followed after him, but hung back in the doorway to call back to Patricia: "That tramp flyer who's gone to your head so strong won't have so much room to flap his wings when we get him in jail to-night!"

"Oh, Alfred, you're impossible!" she cried impatiently. "Can't I admire a man's flying without your accusing me of having a case on him?"

"You're engaged to me!" Eames said heatedly, coming back into the room. "I'm not going to stand for your mooning around some nobody, just because he can fly an airplane."

Her eyes flashed and she drew herself up haughtily. "Have it your own way, then," she said coldly. "I am wild about the man." She darted past him and was gone.

He started to follow her, but changed his mind on reaching the door and set out to find Alden.

An hour later they drove up and stopped in front the Palace Grill in Mecca. Alden went inside.

When he came out after nearly half an hour, he wore a pleased look. "I got it all right!" he said to Eames, as he got into the car. "He held me up, the robber! Had to pay him twenty dollars an acre, and he bought it five years ago for a dollar. Drive on down to the jail and we'll see Lem Knowles about taking them in to-night."

"It's worth the price, though," Eames remarked consolingly. "If you don't pen those two up, there's no telling what it's liable to lead to."

"I'll pen 'em up—you can bet your life on that!" Alden cried. "I'll see Craig makes it six months for old Moja this time, and about ninety days for that smart cub."

"If it was me, I'd see he got a hundred and ninety," Eames said spitefully, but Alden offered no reply.

When Alden arrived at the jail, he found the sheriff, Knowles, in his office. Immediately he began to give his orders.

"You or Morgan better stick around pretty close the rest of the day," Alden said, "so you can land on old Flint and that other fellow when they come back.

"I bought that eighty acres Harlo had down at the edge of town. That's where they'll land again to-night. I'm going to stay around pretty close myself. I'll call you when the time comes."

News of Alden's purchase, the reason, and the exorbitant price spread with unbelievable speed. By noontime all Mecca was agog with interest. As early as three o'clock in the afternoon, the ears of the town were set to catch the first sound of the returning plane.

The pilot, dropping down onto Alden's newly acquired land, would add another interesting chapter in the big man's fight to deprive old Moja Flint of his mine.

Alden was as impatient as any that waited, so was Eames. Most of the long afternoon they whiled away in driving back and forth between the field and the sheriff's office.

About five o'clock, as they were coming back through town en route to the jail, Eames made a discovery that failed to bring joy to either one. "There's Patsy's car. What's she doing in town?" he asked heatedly.

"Stop," Alden commanded. "It's just like her to come running in to see what's going on. If I can find her around here, I'll send her on home."

"Oh, let her stay and see the circus," Eames protested. "She seems to think this bird, Waring, is so much of a flyer, it might change her mind when he comes gliding down like a boob and steps right into jail."

It was nearly dusk before some sharp-eared listener caught the first whirring notes from the propeller and spread the news. Then within a minute or two the loud exhaust from the cylinders sounded and a general rush for the field began.

Drawn a little distance away from the crowd were Alden, Eames, the sheriff and his deputy, and Patricia. She had slipped out from the crowd and joined them, despite her father's strenuous objection.

As the plane swung into sight, Alden issued his final orders to Knowles and the deputy. "Run out and grab 'em the second they get down," he said. "Lock 'em up and forget about 'em till morning."

"Look out there!" Knowles cried out as he turned around. "He's getting ready to put 'er down."

The plane was less than five hundred feet high now. Waring had cut the throttle and started to side-slip down with a terrific whistling of the steel cables.

Lower and lower it descended. Then he flattened out quickly, glided a few feet before tail skid and wheels met the sand a fraction of a second apart. In

the face of the brisk wind that was blowing, they rolled but a few yards before coming to a dead stop.

Waring saw the gathering of people little more than two hundred yards out front. The crowd broke and moved toward the ship. The aviator saw nothing significant in the movement. He bent down to shut off the gas feed, but a screech behind brought him up with a start.

"Look!" he heard Moja cry. "There's Jim Knowles, the sheriff, an' Amos there, too. They's sure gonna be trouble now!"

CHAPTER V.

CLICKING HANDCUFFS.

WARING took one glance behind to make sure Moja had not started to climb out, then snapped the stick ahead and opened the throttle wide. Slowly, slowly the tail raised as the ship gained speed, headed straight for the surging crowd of people.

Fifty yards covered, and not more than a hundred yet to go before he would crash into them! Gingerly Waring drew back on the stick. "Not enough speed!" he groaned.

Another twenty-five yards slipped under the wheels; the gap between narrowed maddeningly. Again he drew the stick back—and sighed in relief.

He could leave the ground even now, with a fair chance of staying in the air when he got up. But with still another twenty-five yards to go, he knew he could win.

The onrushing mob had stopped to a man, spellbound, rooted in their tracks it seemed. A few feet in the lead were Alden and the others.

They, too, had come to a standstill, directly in line with the bounding, roaring plane, just waiting for that droning, sharp-edged propeller to chop through the little group. Amos Alden was a veritable boiling pot of mingled fear, anger, and disappointment.

He strove to shout, and his mind formulated the words he wanted to utter, but all that came from his mouth was "Crazy fool!" mumbled over and over again.

One instant it seemed death would descend. Even as they stared, with horror-stricken eyes, the plane cleared the ground a foot or two, shot straight at them, then hurtled far over their heads, and was gone.

Fully a hundred feet in front of them, Waring yanked the stick back. The ship leaped off the ground at a forty-degree angle, rose to a hundred-foot elevation, then leveled out straight again at his touch.

Looking back at Moja, once they were well off the ground and the danger passed, the sight that met his eyes made him laugh. Both of the old man's hands gripped the cockpit cowling so fiercely the knuckles shone like tiny ivory spots.

His face ashen, a wild stare in his eyes, mouth agape, he presented a medley of terror, anger, exhaustion, and relief all in one.

Waring banked sharply and flew back over the crowd at low altitude, then circled back and followed the main street over town and was soon out on the desert beyond. After two or three minutes' flying, an opening in the chaparral and cactus loomed up on his right. He cut throttle and glided down to a landing.

"I guess we're safe here for a minute or two, anyway," he said, when they had landed and rolled to a stop.

Moja thrust a bony finger in his collar and jerked it roughly, gulped once or twice, then succeeded in finding his voice.

"I'd a-ruther got bit by a rattlesnake than to gone through what we jist did," he complained.

"That wasn't anything," Waring said, keeping a straight face.

"Ain't anything? Well, you jist tell some o' them hombres we jist jumped

over that it ain't nothin', an' see 'em reach fer their guns!"

"Say, why didn't you tell me that land belonged to Alden?" Waring asked, the thought just occurring to him.

"It don't."

"Then what do you suppose——"

"S'pose nothin'; he prob'ly went out this mornin' an' give ol' Harlo a couple o' dollars'n acre fer it, so's he could have an excuse to jump us. Didn't I tell you they was some dirt'n the air, didn't I?"

"Who owns this?" Waring said, paying no attention to the old man's attempt to vindicate his prediction of trouble.

"Gov'ment."

"Well, we're safe to hold out here for a few days, anyway."

Waring jumped out of the cockpit and helped the old man get down. "How much is in there?" he asked, lifting a small leather pouch from the seat and tossing it to Moja.

"Perty close to four pound," was the reply. "'Tain't a drop'n the bucket to what we'll get when we dig down deeper, though."

Giving the ship a final inspection before leaving for the night, they struck off toward the reflection of light that marked Mecca, and reached the hotel after an hour's walk.

Though no one molested them or seemed to notice when they emerged from the desert and walked up Main Street, not many minutes passed before Alden was aware of their return.

Hardly had they taken seats in the dining room before he burst in, in his wake Patricia, Eames, and the two officers. Alden was in an ugly temper.

A series of causes had tested his forbearance to the limit: the anticipation under which he had gloried all day, only to be snatched from his hands so abruptly; the money he had spent; the unnerving airplane episode. Finally, the attitude of the people of Mecca, swerved abruptly from awe, when victory seemed in his grasp, to contempt, derision, in his hour of failure.

Eames and the officers followed Alden up to the table. Patricia lagged behind a few feet and stood watching. Those seated at adjoining tables got up and moved closer, eager to miss nothing that transpired.

Waring worked his chair back from the table as the men approached, and sat looking up into Alden's furious face, a quirk of a smile about the corners of his mouth.

"Think you're pretty smart, don't you?" was all the big man could think to say on the spur of the moment.

"Have to be, Alden, to keep a jump ahead of you."

"Well, you're not an inch ahead of me. I own that land down there where you pretty nearly killed off half the town a while ago. And I'm going to have you hauled up for trespassing. Here, Jim!" He turned to Knowles. "Take both of 'em along with you."

Knowles started foward.

Waring kicked his chair back and got up. Moja slid out from under the table and stationed himself behind him.

"Just a moment!" Waring cried, giving the sheriff a push that sent him back against Alden. "Where's your warrant? You can't swear either of us were in the plane that came down there and took off again. You might have made an arrest there on the ground, but you can't come in here and do it without a warrant."

"Warrant?" Alden shouted. "He don't need any warrant. I'm telling him to take you in, and that's enough."

"Not by a long shot it isn't, Alden! You're not framing something on a helpless person this trip. Go ahead, sheriff, and try to lay hands on me, or him either, without a bona-fide warrant!

"It's a pretty sure thing your bonding company doesn't know the way you're laying them liable with your shady tactics down here," Waring went

on. "If you persist in taking me into custody illegally they'll soon know about —through a damage suit for about fifty thousand dollars!

"Alden may run your office and the justice court. He may have a big drag in the superior court, too, but there's an attorney general, don't forget! There's enough at stake to make an appeal to him worth while."

Alden, unable to understand his failure to obey a nagging impulse to lunge forward and with his big, gnarled fists beat down this puny interloper, merely stood by and drank in every rankling word. "Take him!" He nudged the sheriff fiercely when Waring finished.

"But he's right, Amos; I ain't got a warrant," Knowles turned appealingly to Alden.

"Bosh!" Alden cried savagely. "Take him anyway and get a warrant afterward. It's been done before."

Knowles shook his head. "I won't mix myself up in any trouble over a warrant. What's an hour or two? He won't run off while you're getting a warrant from Judge Craig." He met Alden's domineering gaze just a trifle defiantly, something he had never done before.

That look was the last straw to Alden. In this hectic hour, insubordination on the part of one who for years had followed his orders without a murmur was not to be tolerated. Without warning his right hand drove up straight from the hip, catching the sheriff under the chin, and down he went.

"You double crosser!" he snarled, then turned upon the deputy. "Now *you* arrest 'em, or you'll get some of the same medicine!" he threatened.

Morgan moved toward Waring.

"Hold on there," the young man said. "You just heard your chief refuse to act without a warrant. Are you going to try to do something he took a crack in the jaw rather than do? You need a warrant to arrest me, but you don't need one to arrest that big bully over there.

"For all you know, Alden killed the sheriff when he knocked him down. I demand that you take him into custody. If you can't do it alone, you've got the right to call on anybody here to help you."

Morgan looked about desperately. He was in a quandary. If he obeyed Alden, he would reckon with the sheriff. If he attempted to arrest Waring instead, trouble was to be had there, too. But there was something in the calm air of the younger man that impressed him, brought confidence.

"I've got to arrest you, Mr. Alden," Morgan said reluctantly. "You had no business to knock Jim down like you did."

Alden's answer was to lunge forward. The deputy, expecting just such a move, side-stepped. Frantically he signaled Waring, then Alden wheeled and was upon him. Step by step Morgan was forced back against the wall, the crowd breaking away to let them through.

Waring elbowed his way to the front and flung himself on Alden's back. One arm circled the thick, bull neck, while the fingers of his other hand twined into the mane of coarse hair.

Jerking with that hand vigorously, and drawing his arm tightly around the neck, Waring forced Alden to release his hold on Morgan and fight to save himself.

Alden was at a sad disadvantage. Madly he struggled to dislodge that choking arm, but the hand twined in his hair kept him bent back too far to permit his bringing his great strength into play.

Meanwhile Morgan was watching his chance. When Alden's hands came close together, as he clawed at the arm around his neck, the deputy made a quick swipe with his handcuffs and snapped them on. Waring released his hold and fell back.

Alden slipped and went down on his knees, but was up in an instant prepared to fight some more, despite the handicap of his fettered hands. When he saw Morgan, gun in hand, backed up against the wall, Alden held back the lunge he was all set to make.

"You come a step nearer," the deputy warned, brandishing the weapon, "and I'll drill you right between the eyes. I'm going to lock you up till Jim comes to.

"Turn around there now and walk out ahead of me, and no monkey business, or——" He gave Alden a vicious prod with the barrel, as the people spread to let them through.

Eames and Patricia rushed up, when Morgan started to march Alden away. Morgan brushed them to one side roughly, saying:

"I'm taking him to jail, not the whole family—stand back there!"

In the scuffle of the crowd, to fall in behind officer and prisoner and get through the narrow doorway, the girl became separated from her companion. She was being jostled around in none too gentle a manner when Waring, glancing around to see what had become of Moja, discovered her plight.

By the time Waring forced his way in to where she was, her position had become serious. For she was caught squarely between the milling mass, struggling to break the jam at the door, and those still farther behind that pressed forward.

Waring finally managed to get her out of the crush, assisting her to a little cleared space behind one of the dining tables.

She let herself drop weakly into a chair. It was a moment or two before she recovered from the daze. She looked up and recognized Waring. His hand still rested on her shoulder to prevent her toppling out of the chair. Patricia freed herself angrily and started to get up.

"You'd better sit right there till this stampede subsides," he said quietly, renewing his hold of her shoulder. "Unless, of course, you enjoyed the manhandling you were undergoing out there in the middle."

"I was perfectly all right," she retorted. Although she affected a resentful attitude it failed by far to blend with the grateful light that flooded her frightened eyes for an instant, then melted away.

"Haven't you caused enough trouble without rushing in there like a clumsy old bear and dragging me around like a sack of salt?" she cried, as she turned her back on him.

"Oh, excuse me!" he replied in a propitiatory tone. "From where I stood, you seemed certain to be knocked down and trampled upon any second. You'll pardon my poor judgment, I hope?"

When she ventured a sly look out of the corner of her eye a moment afterward, he had already resumed his interrupted quest for Moja.

Eames found her sitting there a few minutes later, idly tracing lines with her finger on the tablecloth, a vague look in her eyes, her face pensive, a faint glow in her cheeks.

CHAPTER VI.

GOLD BY THE HANDFUL.

CONVINCED the girl was safe now and that Eames would shortly find his way back to her, Waring set out to find Moja. The inevitable crisis which he had hoped would stave off a few more days at least, now seemed but a few hours away.

It depended upon how long Alden had to remain in jail. When he was released—look out! It was certain Alden would set in motion every iota of his influence and power. Consequently, the need to form new plans to cope with him was urgent.

Moja was in the center of an awe-

struck crowd that milled around the jail entrance. They had not yet recovered from the sight of the all-powerful boss of Indio County forced to jail at the point of a gun.

The old man was loath to break away, but Waring grasped his arm and made him come.

"It's war with Alden for sure now!" Waring cried. "We've got to prepare for it in earnest. I think the best place for us is the mine. If there's a store still open where we can get a supply of grub and a couple of rifles, show me the way."

They slipped unnoticed in at the side door of the general store. While Waring looked over the stock of guns, Moja selected enough provisions to last a week. Waring finally decided on two .30-30 carbines and six boxes of shells, which he gave Moja to carry. He shouldered the heavy sack of provender. They struck off for the hidden plane.

"I hardly expect Alden to start anything till morning," Waring said as they plodded along, "unless he gets out of jail within an hour or two. But it's better not to take any chances. We'll be ready to hop off at daylight. A few minutes ought to bring us to the mine."

On arriving at the clearing they proceeded to eat a bit. Afterward they sat and talked until Moja, bluntly announcing he was tired and sleepy, crawled under the wing and stretched out.

Waring tried to imitate him, but after an hour deserted the hard, bumpy bed for one of the cockpits. This proved little more comfortable, however, and the coming of dawn was a welcome sight.

Breakfasting from the sack, within a few minutes the motor was started and warmed up, and they were in the air, swinging along to windward of town, just high enough to clear the occasional rising obstructions.

Waring was certain no one in Mecca either saw the ship or heard the roar of the motor. Ten minutes afterward he taxied up to within a few feet of the coulee on Moja's property. They began preparations for another day of crude mining.

The shaft the old man had sunk was about twelve feet deep. The first eight extended through a limestone strata that gave way to a deposit of fine gravel, then dipped suddenly into a bed of coarser formation. In this heavier deposit was found the free gold, varying in size from clover seed to peas.

Moja's method of mining was crude. Except for the richness of the gravel, it would not have yielded enough gold to bother with. There was no windlass, a small tin bucket attached to a wire serving to bring gravel from the bottom of the shaft to the surface.

A rickety ladder provided a way up and down. While working alone Moja would laboriously descend, fill the bucket with a short-handled shovel. The bottom of the shaft was hardly five feet square. Then he would climb back to the surface, haul the bucket up and empty it.

When a dozen or more buckets were carried to the top, he would set to work sorting over the gravel, separating the particles of gold with his fingers. It was slow, tedious work, and his dimming eyesight meant the passing over of any save the larger pieces. Yet the nuggets sprinkled through the gravel were abundant, and one day's work had paid him more than two hundred dollars.

From the beginning the old man had extensive plans in mind. He had picked his way through the barren upper strata to encounter the rich pay gravel below. In three days he extracted more gold than he had ever had before in a single year of his long life. This created a determination to acquire a train of pack mules.

With these he planned to transport the raw gravel to Mecca, the nearest water point, for he knew a dozen pails

of gravel, run through a sluice box, would yield more than a hundred under his method.

Alden's prompt interference, however, not only prohibited this, but even deprived him of the right to work the property at all.

The preceding day, with Waring at the bottom of the shaft to fill the pail as fast as Moja could raise and lower it, they had taken out more than a hundred in three hours. Their joint efforts produced nearly four pounds of gold.

And to-day promised to be far more profitable.

"Let's celebrate our set-to with Alden by making a record to-day, say six pounds before sundown," Waring said.

"Wouldn't be nothin'," Moja scoffed, "if we only had water here or could git it to water. If it wasn't for that Amos, we'd be able to haul the stuff out."

"Well, don't let that worry you too much; he's already showed his teeth and nobody got bit. To-day will tell the tale as far as he is concerned. If we aren't molested out here, it isn't likely we will be for a time. Last night I played a pretty strong hunch he'd be out here on top of us with a gang—that's why I wanted the guns and a good supply of grub."

"S'pose he sends the law out. You ain't calc'latin' fightin' them, be you?"

"If they bring a warrant it would be foolish to; if they don't you bet your life I will. I don't think, though, that Alden will try to make use of the law for a few days. He'll wait until the sheriff has had time to calm down after that punch he let him have.

"My hunch tells me Alden is going to play a craftier, deeper game. He'll hire somebody to plug us in the back, or something like that. Money talks, old-timer, and it takes money to fight money. Give us a chance to knock off a few thousand dollars here, and we'll be fixed to step out and give him a run for some of his own crooked money."

By noon they had made good progress toward a banner day, but the July desert sun had passed from the oppressive to the unbearable stage and drove them to cover under the lean-to. The heat here was still intense. Perspiration fairly rolled off Waring's face. Moja, tanned and baked from half a century in the desert, worked on without a murmur.

After a spell, though, he began to complain about the abated light and finally got up and returned to his old position outside. Waring remained under the lean-to until late in the afternoon.

"We can't go on like this," he said, joining the old man. "It's too hot to be tolerated even under there, and, as you said, we're not getting one quarter the gold, the way we're going.

"I've got an idea. If we don't have trouble with Alden when we get back to-night and end up in jail or court, I'm going to get a few small canvas sacks and a piece of wire screen, about quarter-inch mesh. We'll screen out the rich stuff from the coarse gravel and sack it and take it to town.

"It won't take more than half an hour to make a round trip. Six trips will give us quite a pile to start working on in town where there is water. Or we could bring water here in five-gallon cans."

"Couldn't bring enough," Moja vetoed the suggestion promptly. "Best idee's to cart it to town. It'd be a heap quicker in the end."

"That's a go, then. If everything is quiet when we get back, I'll figure to hop out alone in the morning, sack up some stuff and come back out to the clearing.

"All you'll have to do is be out there with a couple of burros to haul the sacks to town. But hold on, that reminds

me of something else. Where are we going to put the gravel to work on it?"

"I'll find a place," Moja said confidently.

"Well, if that has to be done, we had better pull out of here right now and forget about the record. We haven't got any more gold than yesterday, but we can make up for lost time, once things get going in town."

To this, however, Moja objected strenuously, saying they should wait until just before dark to leave, and that he could locate a place to sluice out the gravel at night as well as in daylight. Too, Moja pointed out, arriving after nightfall they would be less likely to find Alden still in town.

So when the long, fingery shadows began to stretch out over the desert, they were just getting into the air.

Unlike in the morning, to-night Waring took no pains to avoid Mecca, for the passing of the long day without sign of an enemy had bolstered his spirits immeasurably. Straight across the town he swooped, landing wheels barely skimming above building tops and flagpoles.

The town dropped swiftly behind. In a moment or so the clearing loomed up on his right. He cut the throttle and glided down through the gathering dusk. As he leveled off and set the wheels down, he failed to see the dim outline of an automobile, parked close beside a giant cactus stump, less than a hundred yards away.

The conclusion of this story will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and on the news stand May 1st.

SEA TRAMP

By Cristel Hastings

A SCHOONER comes nosing her sluggish way
   Around the harbor light—
She's caked with brine and red with rust—
   And something dims my sight.

For, oh, this sea thing, green with mold,
   With gray gulls in her shrouds,
Has caught my heart and held it high
   Among the flying clouds!

Her gear is battered, and she limps
   Like some poor, beaten thing
That finds its weary way, at last,
   Her sail a drooping wing.

But, oh, my ship is *beautiful*—
   This snub-nosed, reeling thing—
Home from a hundred sodden ports,
   And, oh, my heart must sing!

A TALK WITH YOU

News and Views by the Editor and Readers

APRIL 15, 1928.

At the end of this department is an announcement of our next issue. Turn to it now, read it, then ask your news dealer to put aside a copy for you.

ARE you curious about the authors who write for this magazine? Have you ever wondered what they're like? They take words, and string 'em together skillfully—and the result is a story. How'd they get that way? What have they seen? Where have they been? Are they well-educated men, or have they picked up an education by contact with Life, the greatest university?

In appearance, authors vary considerably. They have no distinguishing marks. Some are plump, others lean. Some have high foreheads, others need hair cuts. Some are fashion plates, perfectly groomed, with collars, handkerchiefs and socks harmonizing. Others are happy clad in khaki shirt, hunting breeches, and a pair of heavy, waterproof boots.

It isn't what an author wears that matters. It's what he puts on paper that you see. But what's back of the story you've read? If it's a Western yarn, has that author been out West? If it's an airplane story, has he ever handled a plane? If it's an adventure story, what adventures has he had?

A number of our writers have been requested to contribute brief autobiographies of themselves. When a man talks about himself, you find out what he's like. You get to know him, to understand him. After you're acquainted with an author, his stories mean more to you. Instead of a name printed on paper, he's an individual. Seeing his name in this magazine, you'll feel that here's a friend who's written another story for *you* to read.

Here's an author with his hand outstretched, waiting to take your hand in a hearty grasp. You've read his stories of the Maine woods, about Herb Hood, the guide. He's written hunting and fishing stories for this magazine, too.

Mr. Reader-of-these-lines—meet Mr. Reg Dinsmore!

I have been asked to say something about myself to the readers of this magazine. Well, there's just one way to get a good job off your hands, and that's to buck into it and get it done. Here's the works.

Born on a farm in the State of Maine so long ago that I don't like to talk about it. Common schools and then high school, which somehow I managed to stagger through. It was pretty bad—high school, I mean—for by then I had been on two or three trips to the big woods, and the lure of them had "got" me. It was much easier for me to think of log cabins, guns, traps, canoes, et cetera, than it was to concentrate on an algebra problem.

After high school, I went through business college—in three days. Should have known better than to start business college just when the deer-hunting season was opening, anyhow.

Then came the time when it was necessary to rustle a living. This I did by devious methods. I farmed, kept books, logged, made snow shoes, operated a saw mill, carpentered, handled a crew of Mex on the Californian-Mexican border for a couple of years, hunted, prospected, trapped, guided—or what have you?

Travel—not a whole lot, but just enough to get a faint idea of the wonderful land we live in. A couple of years on the sunset side of the Rockies. A dip into Old Mexico. A winter in Florida—motor camping both ways from Maine. And, of course, living in Maine as I do, so near the line, I've seen some of Canada.

Hobbies—good friends, good hunting dogs, good guns, good fishing tackle, and all the good things that go with them.

Herb Hood, the Maine woods guide who

has appeared in several of my stories, is not an actual person. He's a composite of the many guides I have met, and with whom I have worked. I've lived with from one to half a dozen hunting dogs for the last twenty years, but I'll be danged if I can write about them to my complete satisfaction. I'm trying, though!

What are my aspirations? Just a moment, please, while some one ties one of my hands. Otherwise, I'll write pages and pages of the things I'd like to do. There! Now—know where the Anderson River is? Well, it takes its rise in some dozen of nameless lakes that lay to the north of the Great Bear, and to the east of the Mackenzie. Now, if a couple of fellows could get into those lakes with a good outfit and a couple of hundred traps—— Aw, I can't tell you all that, not with my right hand tied to this chair, so I'll have to condense.

Once again, aspirations? To see every bit of the outdoor world that my pocketbook and allotted span of years will allow. To keep what good friends I've got, and to make many more. And—somehow, some time—to write one whale of a good yarn!

REG DINSMORE.

He's Enthusiastic

DEAR EDITOR: I have not yet completely finished reading our February 15th issue, but I couldn't wait to let you know how I'm enjoying it. I read one short story after another, finding each was very good.

So far, this issue has been great. Couldn't be better. I've been reading "our magazine" since 1914.

Well, as I still have the novel to read in this issue, I will stop, after thanking you again for a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Very truly yours,

A. E. HAYES.

Mattapan, Massachusetts.

(Thanks for being so enthusiastic. Write in again.—ED.)

Another Youngster Reports

DEAR EDITOR: Another youngster reports! The Cheyenne, Wyoming, youngster has got me beat. I'm fourteen, but I've been reading this magazine for five years. My favorite authors are William Wallace Cook and Albert M. Treynor.

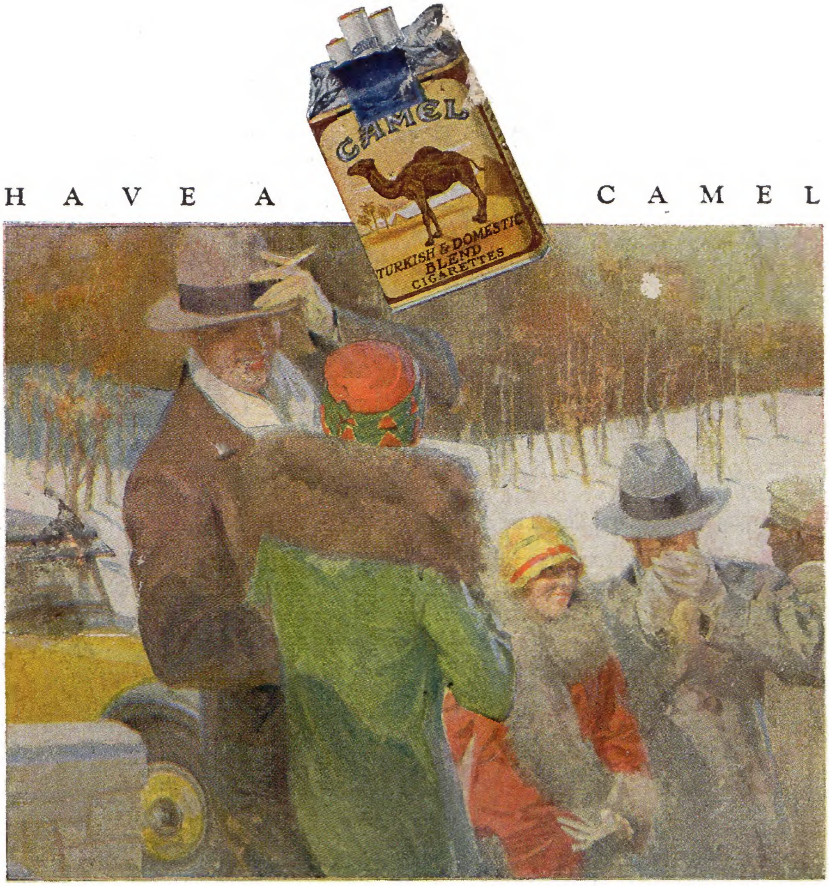
Sincerely yours,

JACK WALKER.

What Cheer, Iowa.

(Your favorites will contribute shortly to this publication, young man. —ED.)

H A V E A C A M E L



One of life's great pleasures is smoking

Camels give you all of the enjoyment of choice tobaccos. Is enjoyment good for you? You just bet it is.